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YOSHI'S WOOLLY WORLD ■ LEGO DIMENSIONS ■ FINAL FANTASY XV ■ MAD MAX
EVERYBODY'S GONE TO THE RAPTURE ■ THE WITCHER 3 ■ PROJECT CARS

Do we still care about E3? It's a question I hear around this time of year as we head into yet another massively hyped and overblown event. As companies strut the stage, indulging their immense egos by spending millions on promotional trailers that have little if anything to do with the final game. It's an event flush with its own self-importance and impact, with often only the slimmest of holds on reality. And to the answer the question, yes I do.

I'm willing to concede that this may be based largely on nostalgia on my part; pining for an age when E3 was the best chance a publisher had to get the word out on its latest wares. These days that's called a Tuesday. Usually around 4pm for the highest possible social media engagement. Now E3 announcements take place the week before E3 and press events take place in the months leading up to it. Publishers become politicians, releasing their statements to the press ahead of the big speech.

It's all become a little bizarre, but the event itself, the real stuff that happens behind closed doors; the hands-on time with new games, the interview time with top developers eager to discuss their new projects, the chance to rub shoulders with the up-and-coming indie developers from around the world, that's what I care about. This is where the gaming community gets a chance to commune. It may not be ideal, it may be frantic and chaotic, and it may just as easily be achieved by heading to a bar as taking over Los Angeles for a week, but it still holds some magic for me.

Jon Gordon

Jonathan Gordon
EDITOR




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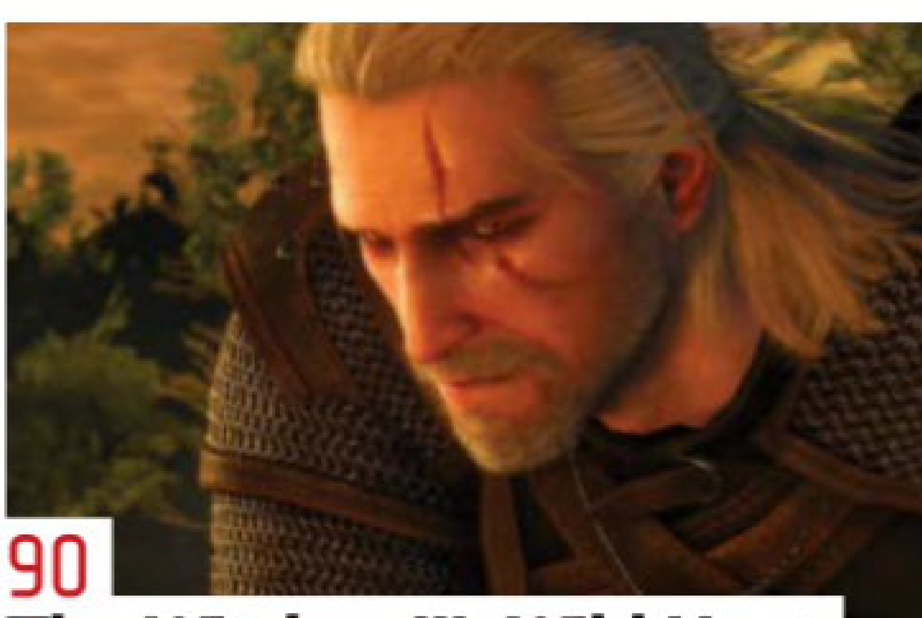

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Is this really Batman's last stand? We speak exclusively to Rockstead and play the final build

(THE PC ARMS RACE)

Time To Buy A PC?

→ We spoke to Chris Roberts (creator, Star Citizen) and Jake Solomon (creative director, XCOM: Enemy Unknown) about the resurgence of the PC gaming scene and how it can still lead the industry for innovation and graphical prowess

Right at the start of the year, Microsoft held a pretty important showcase – one that focused on Windows 10 (conveniently leaving out 9), one that promised to be the only format gamers would want to use, one that seems designed specifically for our hobbyist corner of the tech market. This game-centric checklist includes updated DVR, so you can upload movies and images directly from your feed online; it included DirectX 12, graphics software that Microsoft reckons will boost some games' performance by as much as 50%; it announced cross-platform capability (in case you wanted to play *Forza* with your Xbox One pals); and finally, it announced the ability to stream your Xbox One session to your mobile device or PC – targeting the Vita's PS4 streaming directly, it seems.

Fast forward to April and May, and two pretty big things happen for PC gaming – firstly, *GTA V* is released, and there's a feeding frenzy: every news feed on the internet is full of crazy physics gifs, mods *instantly* appear and we see whales falling from the sky, and, every now and then, we're even treated to a couple of shots of *GTA*



Below The pro gaming scene is dominated by PC titles such as *Counter-Strike: GO* and *League Of Legends*.

DATA STREAM → WOMEN'S NATIONAL TEAMS ARE BEING ADDED TO FIFA 16 FOR THE FIRST TIME



Inset Even immensely successful games like *Skyrim* have seen their lives greatly extended by incredibly creative modders on PC.

V running in full Ultra. It's a zeitgeist, still very much underway at the time of writing. "One of my favourite strengths of PC gaming is modding, hands down," explains Jake Solomon, creative director on *XCOM: Enemy Unknown*, when we broach this topic. "I love seeing how modders take a game into a different direction, or completely rebuild it. It does so much to keep a game's community alive and vibrant after the release of a title".

Second, early on in May, there was this whole furore with mods on Steam – the publishing platform briefly experimented with offering paid mods for its games, something that hit a controversial peak with *Skyrim*. Gamers cried out, stating if they wanted to pay for mods, they'd do it themselves, through donations or crowd-sourcing. Otherwise, Steam was the villain here – monetising content it seemingly shouldn't, going against that community spirit the PC has become known for. Modding, and the sharing of games running on insane PC settings, is basically free advertising for the publishers, and *Star Citizen*'s Chris Roberts sees this as one reason more and more developers are returning to the PC as a platform: "You're seeing more original and PC first / only titles and publishers are discovering that there is a big audience that will reward you if you treat them with respect and give them games that play to the strength of the PC platform…not dumbed down ports from less powerful console platforms… which unfortunately was the norm just a few years ago."

> "I love seeing how modders take a game into a different direction, or completely rebuild it"
>
> **Jake Solomon, creative director, XCOM: Enemy Unknown**

He's right – think EA, Activision, Ubisoft. Between DRM issues and late releases of the PC version, these publishers muddied their name on the PC format somewhat. "Just look at how well *GTA V* did recently on the PC when Rockstar bothered to invest time and money in making the game shine on a PC in a way it never could on console, with 4K resolution, higher textures, more fidelity," explains Roberts.

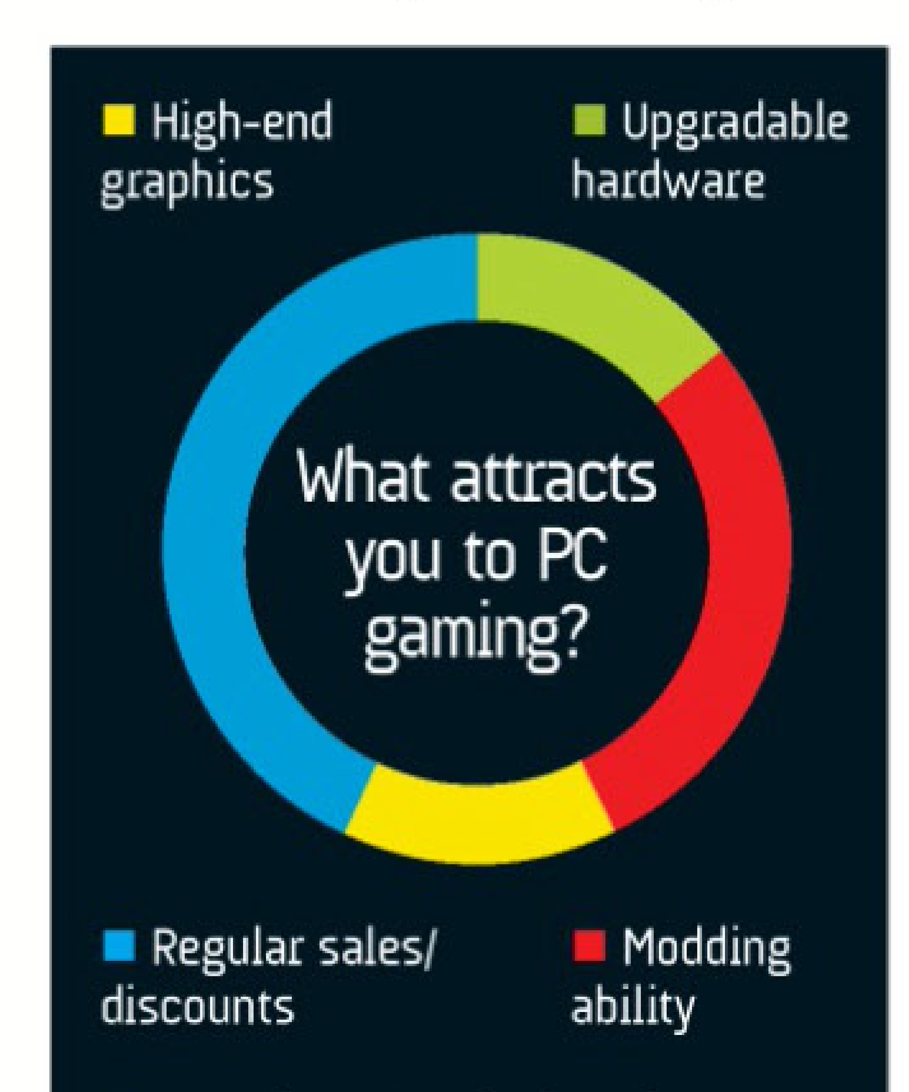
"It's a refreshing change from a publisher deliberately dumbing down a PC version so the console version doesn't look bad. With more powerful hardware, the PC offers so much more in terms of immersion, technology, gameplay and narrative experiences. In addition I think new business models like digital distribution and

Below Though a lot of competitive FPS players have moved onto console, the PC is still the (spiritual) home of the genre.



Reader Reaction

We asked you what PC gaming could offer you over consoles, and what element of the format initially drew you towards your own rig?



I can't begin to calculate the amount of money I've saved by being a PC gamer instead of a console gamer. It's not just that there are sales all the time on Steam or UPlay or wherever, it actually changes your point of view on how much is acceptable to spend on a game. I know my brother regularly spends over £40 on individual games, whereas I wouldn't dream of spending more than £20 because I know for a fact there will be a sale in a few weeks that I can wait for.
Sophie Barnes

I happen to own a PS4, Xbox One, Wii U, and a 3DS in addition to a PC. I prefer gaming on my PC because of higher visual fidelity as well as cheaper games. Unless a game is exclusive to a console, I generally purchase on PC for $20+ cheaper on launch day and have a better overall experience most of the time. Not to mention Steam sales…
Daniel Cooper

Picking up bargains and games you missed is part of the fun of PC gaming. I've never had a fast state-of-the-art PC, but there is always a steady stream of older games I can play. Upgrading soon, so expect to be spending quite a bit.
Andrew Fisher


NEED FOR SPEED REBOOT CONFIRMED BY EA, BEING DEVELOPED BY GHOST GAMES


And that's before the Oculus…

→ The Oculus Rift has yet to be formally released to the public, but we're learning more and more about the headset as its releases edges ever closer. The headset going on general sale is inevitably going to give the PC a huge boost in popularity



COST

■ SPEAKING AT Code Conference recently, Oculus CEO Brendan Iribe stated that the Oculus, alongside a computer actually capable of running the device, would hit shelves with a cost "in the $1,500 range". At the time of writing, that's just over £980.

£980 would otherwise get you:

3.26 PS4s (RRP £299.99)
3.26 Xbox Ones (RRP £299.99)
7.76 Wii Us (RRP £150)
5.44 3DS consoles (RRP £180)
5.47 PS Vitas (RRP £179)

> "The problem is that people have just ignored the PC for too many years"

Chris Roberts, creator, Star Citizen, Wing Commander

crowd funding have levelled the playing field for smaller studios allowing them to directly reach their audience as opposed to going through a whole bunch of middlemen."

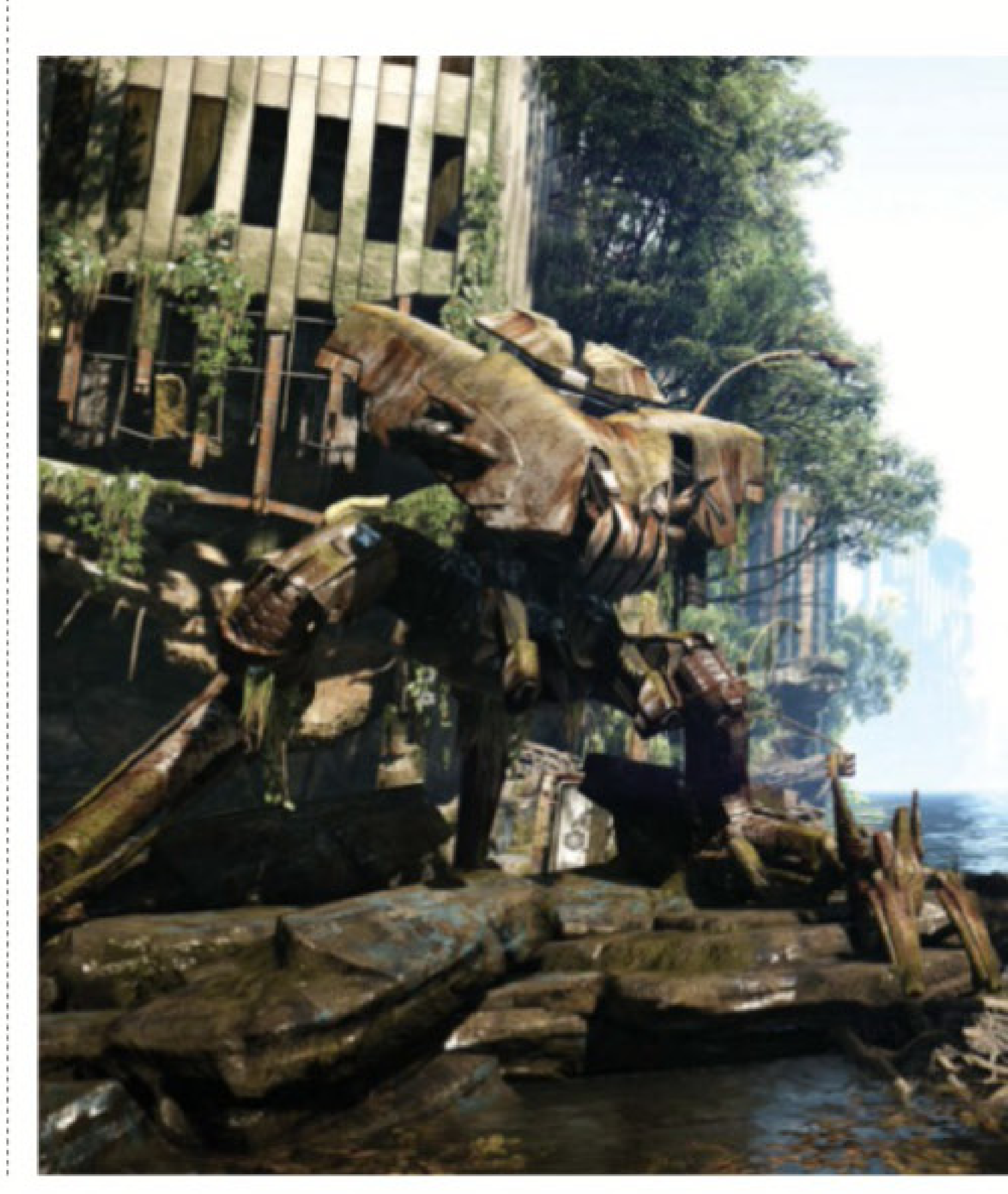
It's an interesting point Roberts ends on there – yes, you've got services like ID@Xbox and the refined PSN luring developers to make games for its platforms, but the PC has long been the domain of the indie dev. After all, where else are you going to develop your game in the first place? "A PC has certain advantages as a development platform," explains Solomon, "and since digital delivery is well-established for PC games, it's really opened up what people can create and bring to gaming. A small team can be really passionate about their project, and find a way to bring it out to a wider audience, and potentially draw in more people who haven't traditionally considered themselves 'gamers' per se. And I think that's fantastic!"

With platforms like Steam, Green Man Gaming and many more allowing direct access to developers and their games, it's no wonder we're seeing more young teams test their releases on open platforms like this, versus PSN or on the Xbox, where there's always the expectation of more sales, of a bigger return. "The PC is essentially an open canvas for developers," Roberts explains, "it's always going to be the platform where you'll see the most innovation. Therefore, you'll see more original content on the PC and I think that's the thing that is attractive to gamers. Steam, GoG and others are part of that 'canvas' where indies can compete with the traditional publishers and have their products delivered directly to gamers."

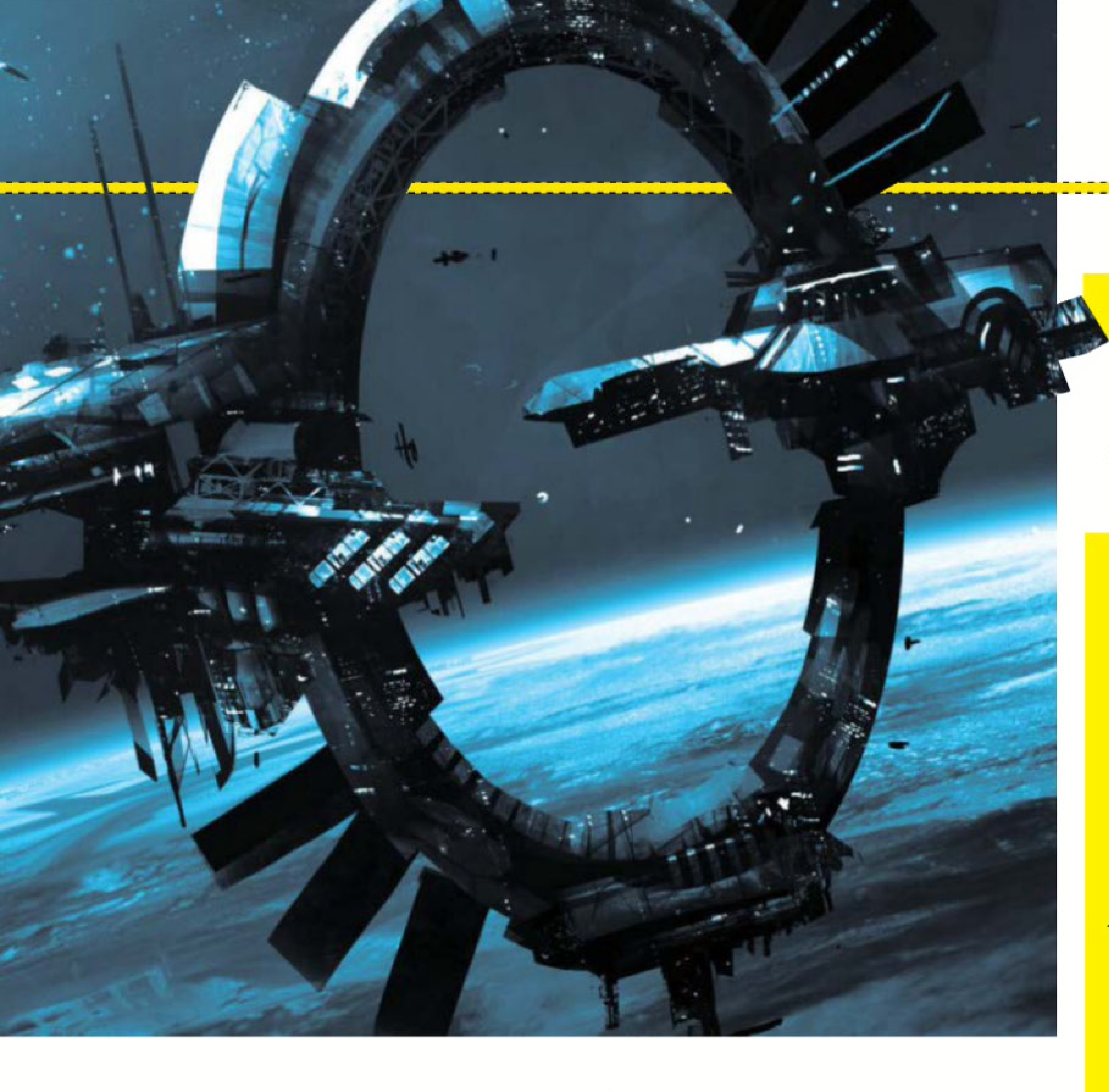
BUT THAT'S ONLY one small part of what PCs can offer – on top of a *much* broader depth of choice for gaming (and we're not even going to talk about emulators here), there's the hardware upgrades you can swap in as and when you please, never limited by the 'sealed box' as you are with PS4s or Xbox Ones. "There's usually a game out there that is a real hardware monster," Solomon tells us, "and I'm always impressed by developers who are pushing what the hardware can do. But over time those hardware specs become more and more common, as processor speeds and memory and graphics hardware increase in power, and the baseline PC gets stronger. I think that's one of the greatest strengths of the PC as a platform."

Inset Chris Roberts is certain that more hardware-pushing games like *Star Citizen* will start to appear for the PC in the years to come.

"For us, using every ounce that the PC and its hardware can give provides the most immersive experience to our players," Roberts continues. "I think you can see this drive all the way back to the first *Wing Commander*. The technology that we currently have provides the most immersive experience in our industry's history. I've always wanted to push the envelope when it comes to technology and I think this is one of the reasons we've had such strong support on *Star Citizen* – our backers want a game that really shows off the potential of the PC as a gaming platform."



DATA STREAM → SONY HAS CONFIRMED PROJECT MORPHEUS WILL BE RELEASED IN EARLY 2016



But – despite our prolonged praise of the platform, it's not all positive. There is, after all, a reason why the console market is still so strong… even if it is beginning to drop off somewhat. "Consoles have the advantage of affordability and usually in ease of use (pop the disc/cartridge in and go!)," explains Roberts, "although between the last generation and the current one, consoles have started to behave a lot more like a modern-day PC insofar as usability. There's just as much day-one patching and load times on modern console games as there is on PCs."



Inset 'Can it run *Crysis*?' is still a question embedded in PC gamers' heads, a benchmark that'll likely run forever in gaming culture.

That's a point we hadn't considered as much before our conversation with Roberts, but it makes sense – we're seeing the console and PC platforms converge, slowly, but the PC has had its entire life to deal with its problems… Problems the console has only just started to deal with (those load times Roberts mentioned have been huge stumbling blocks for both *The Witcher 3* and *Bloodborne* on console).

"The problem is that people have just ignored the PC for too many years," Roberts continues. "It's why I wanted to build *Star Citizen* in the first place. I was sick of playing bad ports of a console game that was based on seven-year-old tech on my top-of-the-line PC with a video card that could push ten times as many polys. I think if more people make games specifically for the PC audience I know they will be rewarded. The PC gamer has been the most loyal of all gamers."

Roberts is right; while a lot of gamers have flipped between 360 and PS4 or PS3 and Xbox One, or even Nintendo to Sony, or vice versa, or any combination of the above, PC gamers tend to keep their rigs alive, even if neglected by games for a time while something else grabs their attention. We say this as PC gamers ourselves, as devotees to graphics card-hunting elite. This could very well be the beginning of the PC resurrection, lead in by the likes of *GTA V* and its mods, lead in by *Star Citizen*, lead in by all of the announcements from E3 this year.

"PC games are back and in a very big way!" exclaims Roberts. "Without a doubt," concludes Solomon. "It is a great time to be a gamer and making games on PC."

…Or The Steam Machines

→ Like the Oculus, it's been a bit up in the air as to when we can expect the Steam Machines to hit the shelves. Here are a few varieties of machine you can expect to see on public release



ALIENWARE STEAM MACHINE
$479.99

■ ALIENWARE IS selling itself with experience here – calling on its two decades of laptop development as a reason for you to invest in its sharp, alien-modifed box.



ALTERNATE STEAM MACHINE
$1,099.99 – $1,999.99

■ YOU READ that price tag right. Built on SteamOS, this box is built for you to be able to 'Ultra' all your settings, for every game. This is the top-end machine.



ASUS ROG GR8S
$699.99

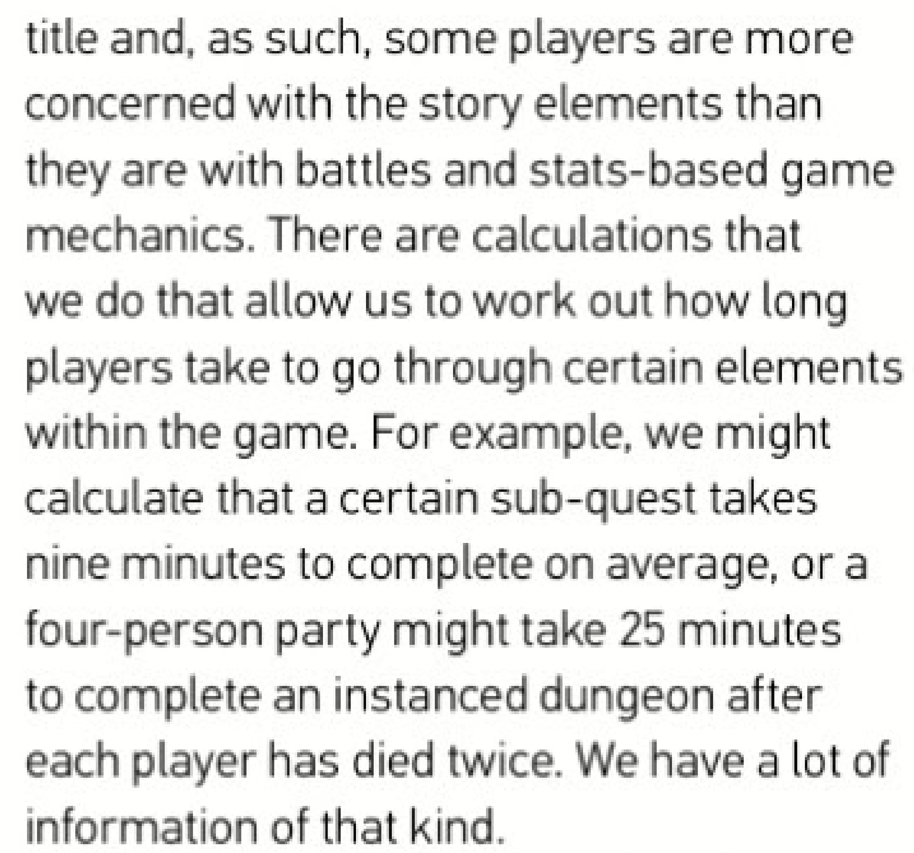
■ DESIGNED 'SPECIFICALLY for the living room', this machine is modelled to be hooked up to TVs, rather than monitors. Hardwired and coded with ROG, it basically wants to be a console.



DIGITAL STORM ECLIPSE STEAM MACHINE
$699.99

■ BOASTING DESKTOP-level performance with a 'minimal footprint', this machine's dedicated top-end graphics card and Intel processor let is double as a desktop, too.


MASS EFFECT PRODUCER CASEY HUDSON HAS JOINED MICROSOFT'S HOLOLENS TEAM

(STAIRWAY TO HEAVEN)

Keeping A Console MMO Alive

→ We sit down with Final Fantasy XIV: A Realm Reborn producer Naoki Yoshida to talk specific details surrounding Heavensward, the MMO's first expansion

A lot of people are likely to start playing *FFXIV* due to being excited by the *Heavensward* content. How will you help get players into this new content quickly?
We actually do have something to help that process along. When *Heavensward* launches we're going to be applying some adjustments to the core *A Realm Reborn* content, especially where the main story quests are concerned up to level 50. The experience points available for the those quests will be more than doubled from their original rate. It's almost like you'll be able to binge watch really quickly that TV series that you've been saving for a long time.

Levelling up doesn't necessarily help you attain weapons and gear, though…
The rewards available for beating quests throughout the game will be improved and you'll be given more of the kinds of armour that is required to get to a level that helps you ready yourself for *Heavensward*. Basically, you won't be forced to play through the extremely difficult quests in order to earn that high level of gear.

We're hoping that will really help new players catch up as smoothly as possible to the veteran players that are already ready to enter the Ishgard realm at the start of *Heavensward*. The dungeons that pertain to the main story quests, and the strategies required to beat those dungeons, are also going to see some adjustments. We're altering the Duty Finder Roulette so that you'll be matched with other players that haven't gone through that content before and we'll be giving priority spaces to players that haven't beaten those areas yet. We hope that will help people improve their skills and level up more quickly so that they can get involved in the *Heavensward* content.

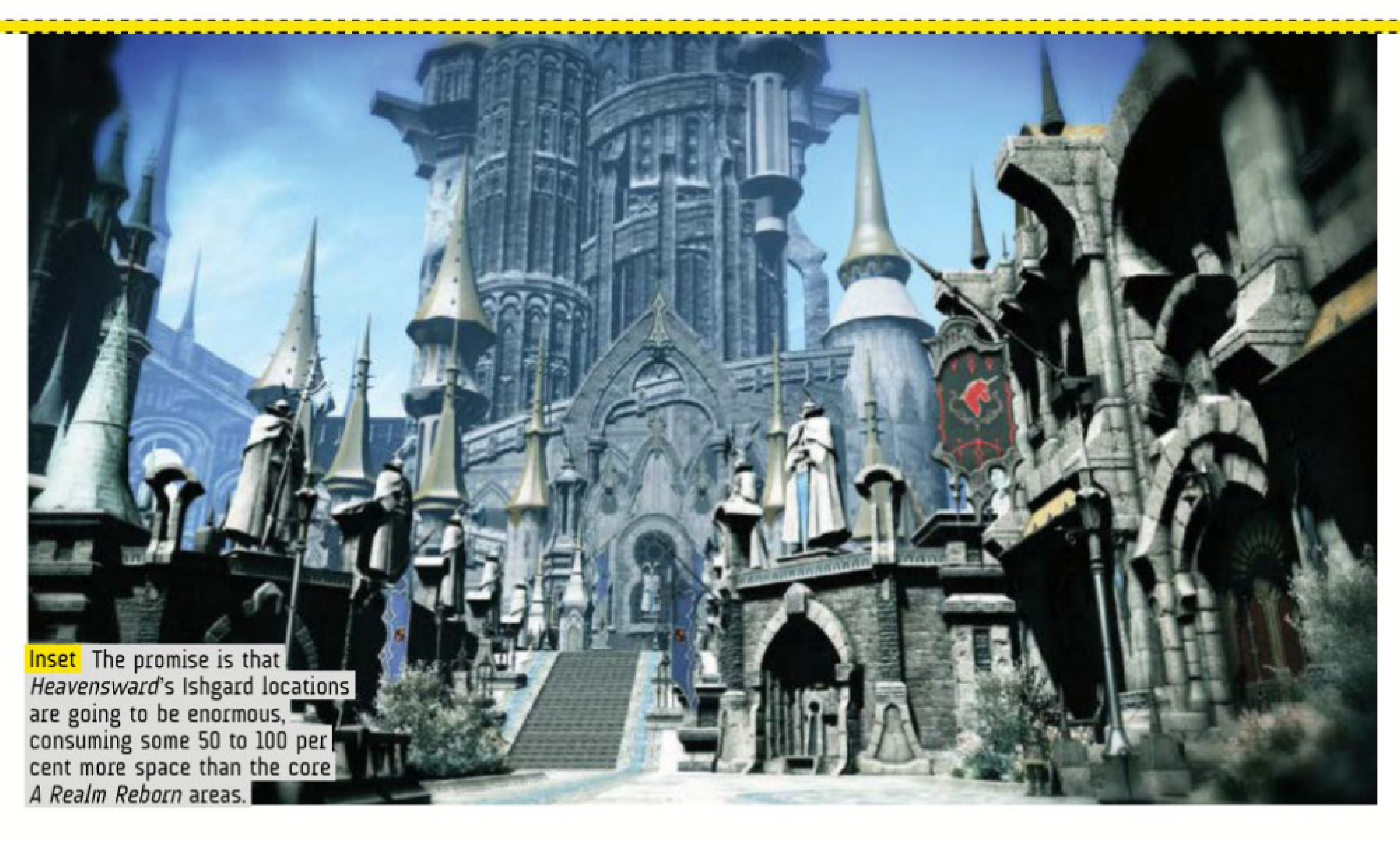


There is a lot of new content in *Heavensward*. How do you balance that? Is it based purely on maths, or is it a matter of instinct?
As a general rule, we do collect data on what content players like and spend time with. With that in mind, though, we have to consider that this is a *Final Fantasy* title and, as such, some players are more concerned with the story elements than they are with battles and stats-based game mechanics. There are calculations that we do that allow us to work out how long players take to go through certain elements within the game. For example, we might calculate that a certain sub-quest takes nine minutes to complete on average, or a four-person party might take 25 minutes to complete an instanced dungeon after each player has died twice. We have a lot of information of that kind.

If we have eight dungeons that players can choose between, we work out how long it takes for each of those to be completed. From there we can work out how much experience should be awarded for each of those in order to make the effort and time required to beat it worthwhile. We also have to consider how much time will be needed for a player to get to a certain level if they only do dungeons, and consider that against the time it takes to get to the same level if they don't do any dungeons.

The difficulty level comes into play here, too. If a mid-level boss in a dungeon wipes out a party four or five times then that boss's gimmick might be too difficult to figure out and the balance is thrown off. We want to make sure players feel good when

→ PLAYSTATION 4 EXCLUSIVE UNTIL DAWN HAS BEEN CONFIRMED FOR A 25 AUGUST 2015 RELEASE


Inset The promise is that *Heavensward*'s Ishgard locations are going to be enormous, consuming some 50 to 100 per cent more space than the core *A Realm Reborn* areas.

> "It's almost like you'll be able to binge watch really quickly that TV series that you've been saving for a long time"
> Naoki Yoshida, Square Enix

they're clearing the content… it has to be challenging, but not too challenging.

So what's the inspiration behind the visual design of *Heavensward*'s areas?
I can't pinpoint any specific locations, but we did reference a lot of historical European structures and Gothic architecture in general. Our art team lead the research into finding out about different kinds of structures and sourcing lots of different images. We didn't just want to copy photos, we tried to really understand the real-life architecture and work out an interesting way to properly translate that into *Final Fantasy XIV* in a way that works for the wider setting and the story.

How does it feel watching people outside of the dev team playing the new content for the first time?
This applies to every update we do to *FFXIV*, but I'm able to enter the realm of the game before it is made public. Being able to access the area before anyone is there, and then seeing them slowly come into the new areas of the world is very exciting. Watching everybody rushing towards the new content as it's released is great and I'm in a very fortunate position to be able to see those areas when they're empty and then see them fill up. I'm sure that's something that only the developer of an MMO can feel. That's the feeling I get with every single update we do, though, and I'm sure that I'll get the same kind of feeling when *Heavensward* is released.

This time you'll be at E3, though…
Yeah. The one downside this time is that the early access for *Heavensward* begins when I'll be out at E3, so I'll be quite busy. The servers open at 2am local time in the United States, so I'll be staying up late on those E3 nights. I'll be up my hotel making sure there are no server issues when *Heavensward* goes online, otherwise I'll need to contact Japan straightaway and come up with a plan to fix it. It might not be for quite a while until I'm able to log in with my own character and enjoy the game as I'd like to.


Above Upgrades are being made to existing job types, too, with each one receiving a level 3 Limit Break – hopefully providing more room for creative thinking when it comes to tougher battles.


Above *Final Fantasy* wouldn't get away with calling itself *Final Fantasy* if it didn't throw at least one dragon in your face. Expect *Heavensward*'s dungeon bosses to pose a very significant challenge.

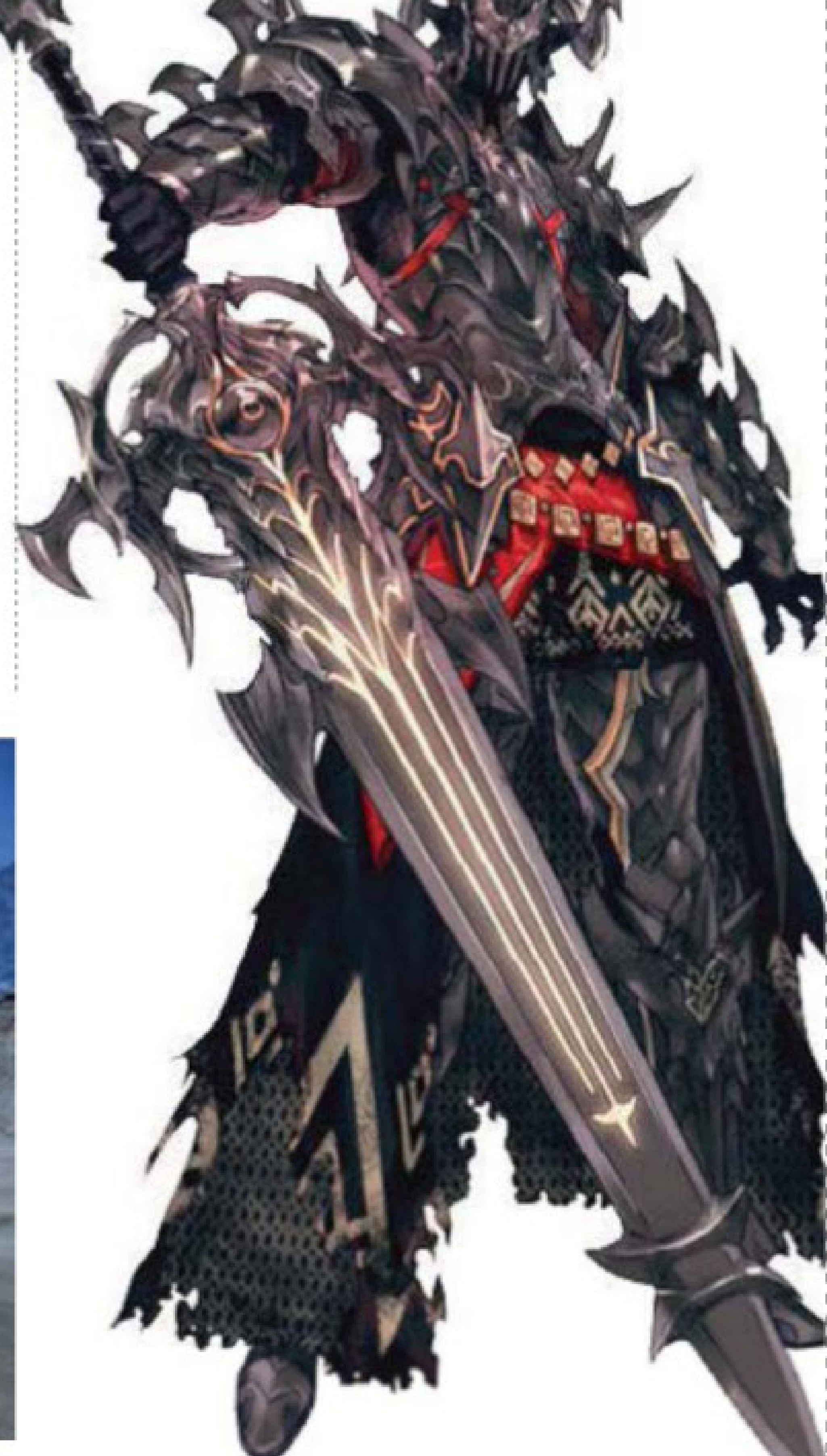

Inset The new Machinist job type excels at long range thanks to its ability to fire a wide selection of different firearms.

A TRIO OF FRESHMEN



Three new jobs are making their *FFXIV* debut in *Heavensward*. The Machinist is an expert in mechanical weapons and gadgetry, wielding guns and turrets and generally making a nuisance of itself at long range. Completely different is the Dark Knight, its up-close-and-personal approach making it the perfect option for players that prefer to play as damage-absorbing tanks. The Astrologian is a magic dealer that specialises in healing and protective spells, so it's a good idea to make sure anyone playing as it is well-protected and safe from death.

The three, on paper, seem to fit together perfectly, but we're looking forward to putting them through their paces to see if they're as complementary as they seem. Beating the game's tougher dungeons, of which those in *Heavensward* promise to be, requires a level of teamwork that can only be achieved by intelligently combining the skills of different classes in this manner.



UBISOFT HAS PUSHED BACK ITS LONG-DELAYED SHOOTER, TOM CLANCY'S THE DIVISION, UNTIL 2016

KONGETSU

NO MORE HEROES



On dealing with the death of a loved one



The dream may be dead, but the memory will live forever. In the splash screen jingle that I must have heard thousands of times growing up; in the iconic cheat code forever engraved onto my brain; in the fond recollection of nights where sleep was forsaken in favour of multiplayer football glory; in the flickering coin-op screens and battered classic cabinets that first piqued my interest in gaming. I'll miss you, Konami.

Of course, Konami isn't the first casualty of the modern gaming age, but it is perhaps the most tragic. Sega's console output, aside from a few key titles, all but dried up years ago, so its open shift to a mobile-focused market was as inevitable as it was upsetting. But with Konami, I saw a publisher that looked to be pulling itself out of a slump – *P.T.* looked set to pave the way for the resurrection *Silent Hill* has long deserved, *The Phantom Pain* was (and, to be fair, still is) shaping up to be one of the biggest and most exciting games of the year and *PES* had found form again after seasons of letting *FIFA* steal the title. But with the Kojima mess, and a public statement pointing towards a mobile focus, it's hard to have faith in this household name's ability to deliver long-term, especially considering the number of popular franchises it appears to have lost down the back of the sofa.

With the rhythm action renaissance this year, where's the timely *Beatmania* or *DDR* sequel I'd play to death? Where did my beloved *Suikoden* disappear to? Was *Lords Of Shadow 2* really such a failure that fans must now flock to Kickstarter to see anything resembling a new *Castlevania* game? And, most importantly, has anyone seen *Bomberman*? He's been missing for years and I'm quite concerned. The sad truth is that even if we *do* see sequels to any of these popular franchises, the hype balloon will be burst by the inevitable 'coming soon to iOS/Android' bullet point.

And we've seen this before. The Western market saw a similar boom in mobile development and focus in the last decade, but the bubble burst. It always does. EA bought PopCap for its casual, mobile-friendly expertise, and the team's last game was what? A console *Plants Vs Zombies* third-person shooter that I still can't believe even exists. Billions of pounds were poured into a mobile market that quickly swallowed itself, a sea of cheap clones popping up around every successful release that gnaw away at its profits until it's barely worth supporting any more. Given how easy it is for copycats to get to market, most Western devs have had time to realise that the App Store is a cut-throat scene where quality rarely turns into profit – just look at the top-grossing apps and try to point out the ones that are actually good games. It's not easy. So maybe there's hope for them, for us, for the gaming world yet? Fingers crossed that this same mobile epiphany won't be too far off for Japanese studios, sending them scurrying back to the home market where they really grew to be household names. It's a different culture to our own, sure, and one where handhelds have long flourished, but that surely means that the crowded mobile market will rapidly grow even *more* insidious and shameless in its methods than our own? Jeez… that doesn't even bear thinking about…

> With the Kojima mess, and mobile focus, it's hard to have faith in Konami's ability to deliver long-term

Luke Albigés is Deputy Editor of **Play** magazine and would play a new online *Bomberman* game forever. Well, assuming it was actually any good…



● Releasing multiple versions of a game at the same time hasn't worked out too badly for the *Pokémon* franchise, so here's hoping Intelligent Systems' strategy favourite will enjoy similar success. The two versions each tell the same story from a different perspective, with the other (as well as a third neutral story) available as DLC. The limited edition has all three. Sounds very *Suikoden III*, and that's fine by us.

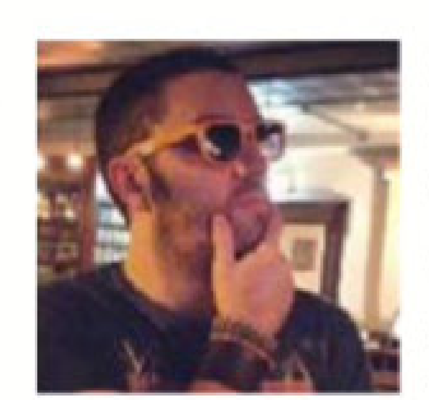


eSports 101

Your Guide to Pro Gaming



Diving into the realms of possibility



Convention season is once more upon us and around the world millions of gamers are wishing they could be there, soaking up the sun in Los Angeles or anywhere else in the world game publishers may be convening. Instead many of us will be heading en masse to YouTube to watch hours upon hours of video footage of the games we want for Christmas, allowing ourselves to be convinced that whatever game we have set our hopes and dreams on will be revolutionary.

Alas, nowadays very few games are revolutionary. Or perhaps I should really say that very few games manage to recapture the feelings we first felt with our great gaming loves back in the day. A moment of revelation is so much harder to find these days where so many genres and mechanics seem well-trodden. That, however, is not yet the case in the world of eSports where innovation is still able to fill us with glee and new surprises abound. This is virgin territory for us to explore as a new field of gaming is finding its feet and there's nothing but promise ahead of us.

Unless you've been hiding under a rock for the last six months you will be aware of the extraordinary explosion in everything eSports. I mean, the word even got added to the dictionary! But contrary to the popular belief I've encountered, pro gaming is nowhere near being the finished article and as such new ground can still be broken. We have seen amazing progress made with games such as *Counter-Strike: GO*, *Call of Duty* and *League Of Legends* but these games are only scratching the realms of possibility.

> A moment of revelation is much harder to find these days where so many genres and mechanics seem well-trodden. That is not yet the case in the world of eSports

So it will be with this child-like innocence that I shall be touring the corridors of E3 this year (or have just finished doing so depending on when you read this) in the hope that we will see a game that will once more help move eSports further forward and deliver that gleeful sense of delight that only new ideas can bring. This is easily the biggest year for pro gaming at this convention.

It is worth pointing out that, to me, progress doesn't mean better graphics or higher frame-rates, as it might to other gamers. Although these things are important in a material world, what I want to see is games that are ready to be played out of the box at a world class level. I no longer want to have to install various communication programs or voice servers because the in-game offerings are still stuck in the Nineties. In essence I'm looking for competition-ready gaming that has the under-the-hood clout to make an impact on the main stages of the biggest competitions in the world.


I no longer want to see new players coming to eSports and being forced to prove themselves to be Google wizards in their search for new teams and communities. Interconnectivity, socialising and community-building are areas I expect to see lots of improvement, even from the established eSports titles out there. No one can afford to be complacent.

This is what I will be looking for when I lose myself in the realms of possibility at E3. Not just flash and pomp and ceremony, but the kind of strong gaming backbone that will mean even the unlikeliest of indie multiplayer shooters might stand a chance of surviving the crucible of a cash prize competition. The eSports world has seen its fair share of imitators and wannabes in recent months and most fall away just as quickly as they appear, but this E3 I'm on the hunt for something more and with the prominence of this field in gaming right now, that's exactly what I expect to find. I can already feel the excitement rising.

Paul Kent has over 16 years experience in the eSports industry and is currently eSports Director at the UK's leading eSports company Gfinity



With pro gaming a larger force in the industry, we expect to see eSports given a lot of time at E3 this year.



WHY I ♥...

MORTAL KOMBAT II


DEREK KIRTZIC, DESIGNER, NETHERREALM STUDIOS

A game I love? Well, funnily enough, it's Mortal Kombat! *I used to sit in the arcades for hours, stay there all day, pumping quarters into the machines. The original Sonya Blade – Kerri Hoskins – used to give me autographed pictures of the cast and crew and things like that. So, I got to grow up as an MK nerd – a real fanboy – and then got to grow up and get the dream job I always wanted. I love it. Getting to work on Mileena – wow! I've been a fan of her ever since* Mortal Kombat II *in 1993, so to make her as I've envisioned her to be for that long has been amazing. We brought her personality through a lot [in* Mortal Kombat X*] – she laughs as she stabs people, she's agile, she's brutal... I'm really proud of the work we've done with her.*



"The original Sonya Blade – Kerri Hoskins – used to give me autographed pictures of the cast and crew"

DEREK KIRTZIC, DESIGNER, NETHERREALM STUDIOS



"If Borderlands 2 is a shooter-looter, Battleborn is a hero-shooter"
RANDY PITCHFORD GEARBOX

Only nine of the 25 characters have been revealed thus far, though Gearbox promises that each will have its own set of traits, personality quirks, weapons and abilities, which is impressive, considering the amount.



Battleborn

CONCEPT ■ A vibrant and colourful first-person shooter that's drawing from a variety of influences to form the new face of multiplayer action in 2015

Borderlands evolved or something new?

MOBA shouldn't be considered a dirty word in 2015. Blizzard is doing its best to make the genre more accessible than ever with *Heroes Of The Storm*; Riot is cleaning up the hate-mongering comment streams in *League Of Legends*; and, for the first time, even console owners have something to look forward to in Hi-Rez's *Smite*. The MOBA genre is no longer something the general consumer should fear, but it still isn't what you should be calling Gearbox's all-new FPS *Battleborn*. Despite initial impressions asserting otherwise, it turns out there's so much more going on under the hood of this colourful shooter.

That isn't to say *Battleborn* isn't drawing from the success of the likes of *League* and *DOTA 2*, what aspiring studio wouldn't, but labelling it such is doing it – and the genre – a disservice. It's not unlike dismissing *Borderlands* as a *Diablo* clone; it bears surface similarities, but that's a franchise that found success by blending its influences together masterfully and iterating on the result.

/// When Gearbox launched *Borderlands* in 2009, it strived to shake up the first-person shooter space by adding an endless supply of loot, an energetic cast and surprisingly robust RPG elements together. The studio succeeded in not only completing its lofty goal, but in kickstarting the 'shooter-looter' phase. Not bad for a game that was once derided for being a soulless shooter riding the dungeon crawler craze, you know, before it embraced that vivid, comic book-inspired, cel-shaded art style.

Gearbox is now clearly hoping to do the same with *Battleborn*, a "hero shooter" with bigger ambitions than anything in its illustrious history. The FPS market is overcrowded, bloated with *Call Of Duty* and *Titanfall* clones, and that's what makes *Battleborn* so damned refreshing. It's bursting with personality; its 25 leading characters *have* character and there's an emphasis on delivering an experience we haven't seen before. But whether Gearbox can actually pull off a feat of this magnitude is another question entirely.

Like *Borderlands* with Pandora before it, *Battleborn* is hoping to create a world so engaging and energetic that players can't help but spend hundreds of hours exploring every inch of its space. *Battleborn* takes place on the last star in the universe: Solus. It's here – the last bastion of humanity after all other stars have been consumed by the game's big bad the Varlesi – where the heroes from various competing factions come together to take on a common foe. Gearbox has revealed nine of its 25 heroes to the public so far, and it's easy to see that there's something for everyone here.

Each of the nine heroes brings a special talent, weapon and skill to the battlefield, so no matter your preference – competitive multiplayer or cooperative campaign – there will be plenty of mixing and matching to find the most potent combinations, not only in terms of character selection, but faction balancing. Each character in *Battleborn* belongs to a unique group, and while the factions have banded together to fight back the Varlesi, it's clear the long-running feuds will come into play for the secretive cooperative campaign. You've got the Peacekeepers intent on protecting Solus, all the while the vampiric Jennerit Empire wants power and dominance over all. Then there's the elven Eldrid vying for order in the universe, a bunch of mercenaries dubbed the Rogues and a group of war profiteers looking to profit dubbed the Last Light Consortium (LLC).

/// Gearbox is creating a rich, lore-heavy world for *Battleborn*, full of characters with personality, which – given that it's an out-and-out shooter at heart – seems strange, at least by today's standards. Perhaps that's because a first-person shooter usually finds its identity from the environment and the guns you're using, but often leaves you with a hollow shell of an avatar. This is prevalent in most multiplayer shooters, but not *Battleborn*, every character choice, gun, ability and ridiculous line of dialogue your character utters only helps to bring *Battleborn* to life.

Seeing *Battleborn*'s competitive multiplayer Incursion mode in motion, it's clear where the initial MOBA comparisons stemmed from. Two teams of five unique characters fight

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PS4, Xbox One, PC
Origin: USA
Publisher: 2K Games
Developer: Gearbox Software
Release: Q4 2015
Players: 1-10

Developer Profile

Gearbox Software has long been known as the studio behind *Borderlands*, but it has a rich heritage. First working on *Half-Life* expansions alongside Valve, and later crafting one of the finest World War II shooters, *Brothers In Arms*. It has a near flawless reputation, *Aliens: Colonial Marines* notwithstanding.

Developer History

Brothers In Arms: Road To Hill 30
2005 [PS2]
Borderlands
2009 [Xbox 360]
Aliens Infestation
2011 [DS]
Borderlands 2
2012 [Xbox 360]

High Point

Borderlands 2 was a new high for cooperative FPS games, featuring awesome characters, action and more loot than you knew what to do with.

across a map utilising several lanes, all the while battling waves of NPC characters and protecting your home base from assault. It's easy to see why that design – combined with a levelling system that resets every match – could see *Battleborn* misconstrued as a valiant attempt to create a first-person *League Of Legends*. Thankfully, Gearbox is taking this is a different direction, and we've got a lot more faith now we've seen some of the other multiplayer modes.

There's Meltdown, a fairly morose game mode which sees each team guiding their minions to death by giant incinerator. Lead them to the centre of the map where points are scored for every minion you can commit to a fiery death. Sure, the minions are robots, but still, incredibly brutal. And then there's Devastation, a more traditional mode not unlike *Call Of Duty*'s Domination, in which teams must capture and hold objectives on the map to win.

/// While those modes sound familiar enough, it's the unique – at least to shooters – levelling system that we see giving *Battleborn* an edge over the competition. You'll start each multiplayer game at level one, throughout the round you'll earn experience and eventually level up. That'll give you access to new rungs of the helix; which is basically a smart, really simply way to handle character customisation in the middle of combat. When it's time to level up, you'll choose one of two upgrades: for example one character might have the option between a red dot sight and a scope for their assault rifle early into the match. Neither is better than the other, but it's all about the way you play. The helix upgrades give you scope to play offensively or defensively, or switch it on the fly to respond to the changing pace of the game. It seems far more responsive and modern than Activision's ageing Pick-10 and Perk systems.

> "The size, scope, and ambition of Battleborn are unlike any other title in 2K's history"
>
> **CHRISTOPH HARTMANN** 2K GAMES

There is a degree of permanent progression in *Battleborn* too, otherwise how would it keep you hooked, right? Each hero can be ranked up to a maximum of ten outside of missions and matches – not dissimilar to *Evolve*'s levelling system – which will earn you permanent gear, skins and unlock more augmentations for the helix menu. Permanent progression doesn't make your character inherently more powerful or equipped, instead it just enhances the variety of ways you can play *Battleborn*.

Interestingly, this system also carries across into the cooperative campaign. You'll level up from scratch for each and every mission, and you'll still be joining up with four other heroes, though you won't be facing off against another team.

Instead, you'll be progressing from one setpiece objective to the next, moving through varying terrains and fighting hordes of enemy NPCs – and this can either be done in single-player, split-screen or online cooperatively with your buddies. It's an interesting concept, but we aren't entirely sold on it just yet. To be frank, it feels like *Borderlands* without the loot, and we aren't sure that the progression system is a good enough replacement for enemies bleeding colourful waves of numbers and weapons of mass destruction.

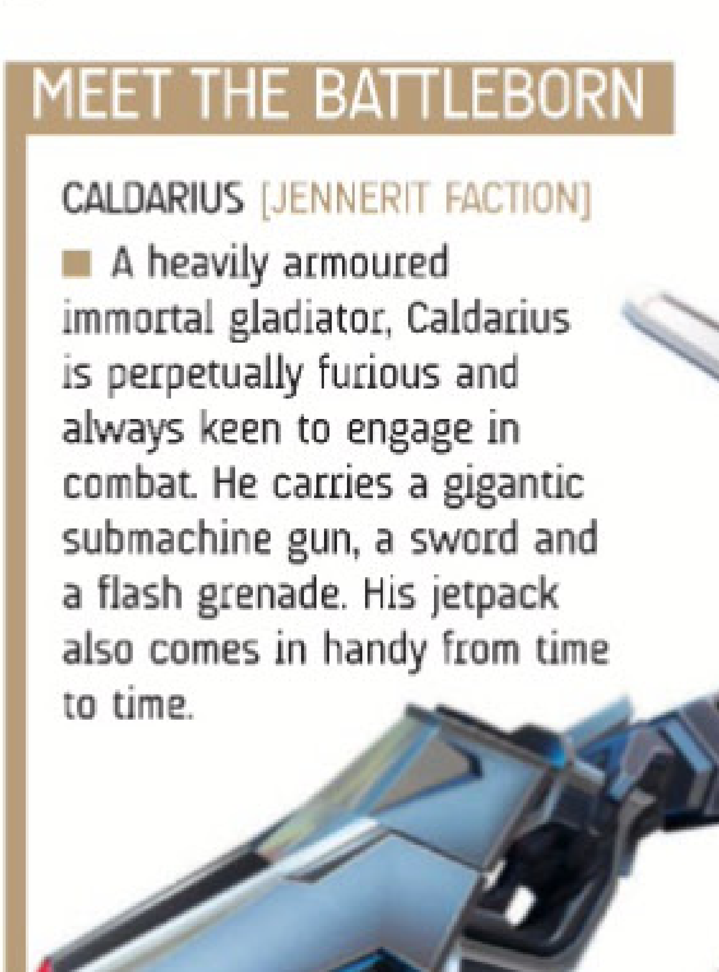
It feels frigid when compared with the chaos that pumps through the veins of the competitive multiplayer. Even at this early stage, it's clear *Battleborn* is trying to do something different and the multiplayer works because of it. It feels fresh in a fashion not that dissimilar to the divisive 2007 *Shadowrun* reboot from FASA Interactive or even Splash Damage's innovative 2011 release, *Brink*. They were both games that tried to refresh the formula, in many respects they worked wonders, in others, well, they completely failed.

We need to see how the cooperative mode will avoid feeling disparate, because right now we get the impression it will be a collection of dubiously insane situations strung together with a nonsensical plot. That's okay and everything, but we've already got a Gearbox game that does that pretty well, and it's called *Borderlands*. What will set *Battleborn* apart – and define its long-term appeal – will be its account-level, persistent progression, which, obviously, we haven't seen enough of yet

It's obviously too early to tell whether Gearbox has another *Borderlands* on its hands or a game bound for a critical and commercial mauling like *Brink*. *Battleborn* is taking the power and potential of the new generation of consoles and trying to do something new with it, and that's commendable. While it's clear Gearbox supports *Battleborn* with a lot of passion, it needs to get it into the hands of gamers quickly, otherwise it'll be unfairly overlooked as the hype begins to build for *Borderlands 3*.



Above: While many were disappointed this wasn't *Borderlands 3*, it is great to see a new IP from such a creative studio. *Battleborn* seems crazier and more energetic than anything to come out of Gearbox before.



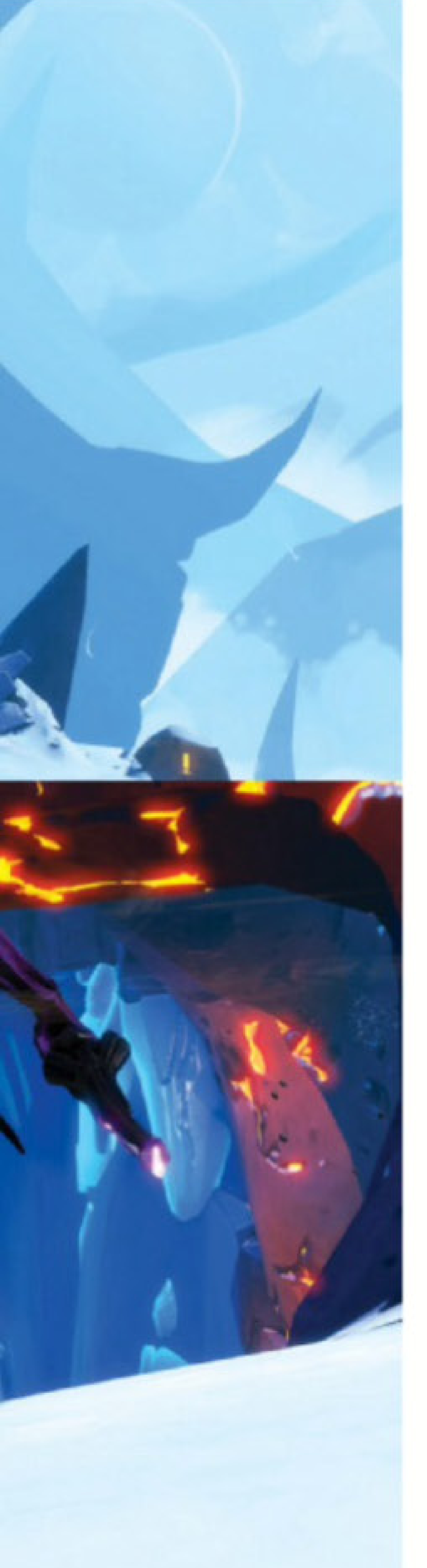
Right: *Battleborn* is due to launch at the end of 2015, though with little in the way of gameplay shown to the public, we could see this slipping.

MEET THE BATTLEBORN

CALDARIUS [JENNERIT FACTION]

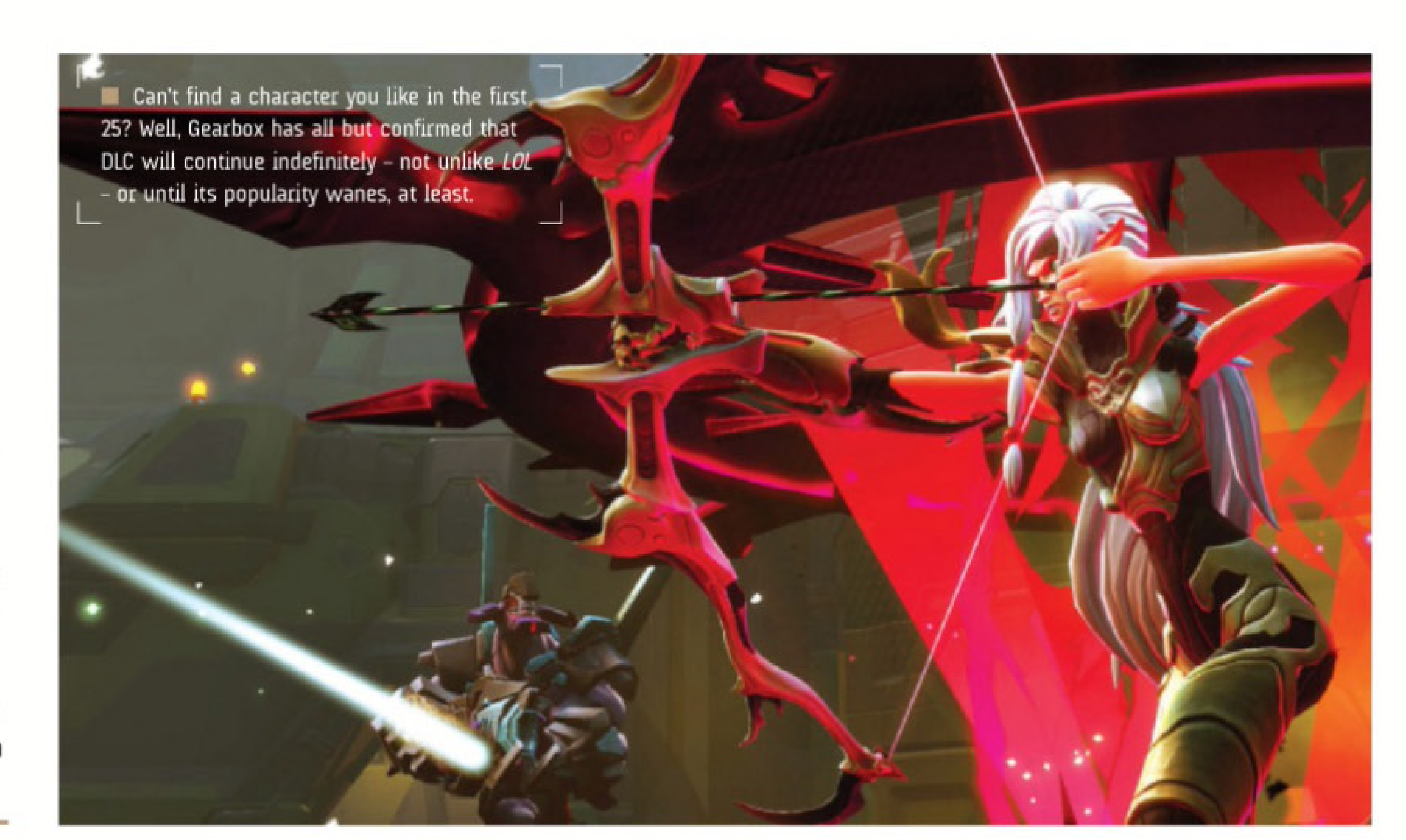
A heavily armoured immortal gladiator, Caldarius is perpetually furious and always keen to engage in combat. He carries a gigantic submachine gun, a sword and a flash grenade. His jetpack also comes in handy from time to time.



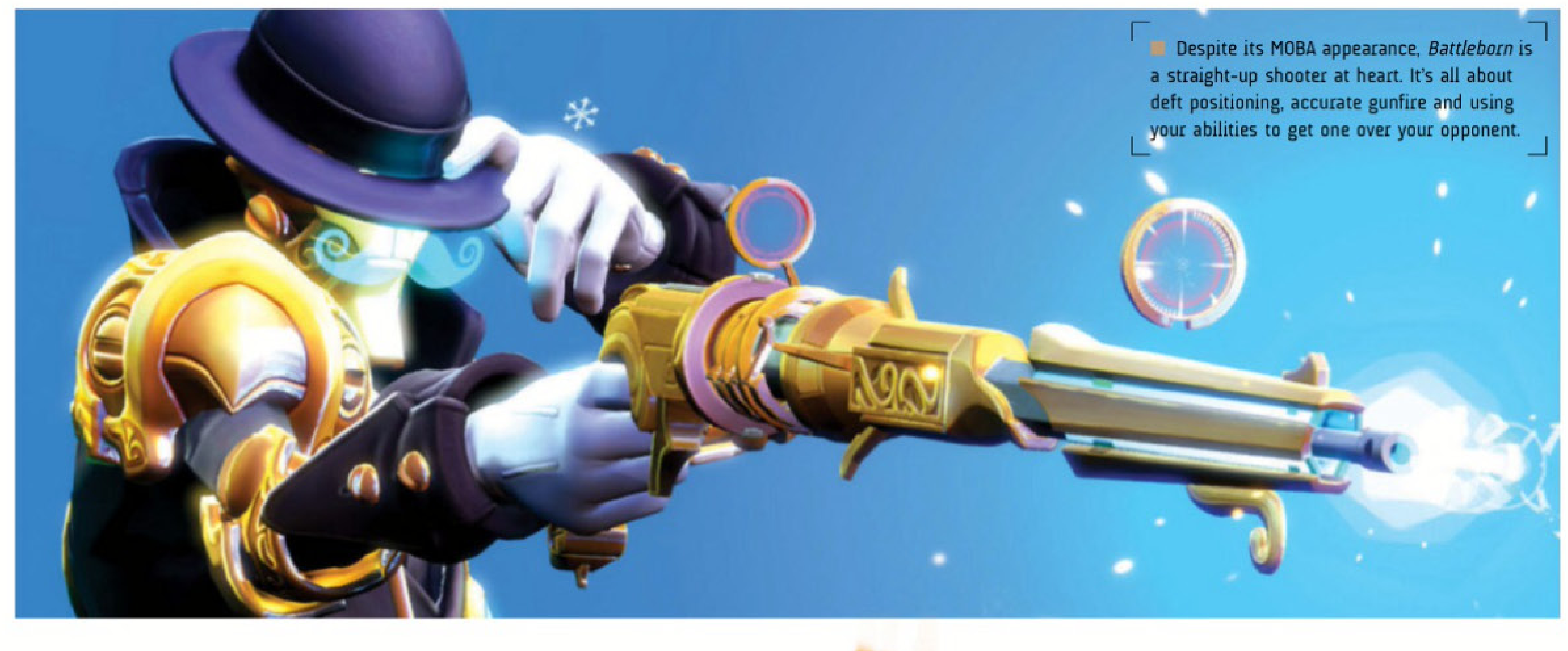


ALL ABOUT THE BALANCE

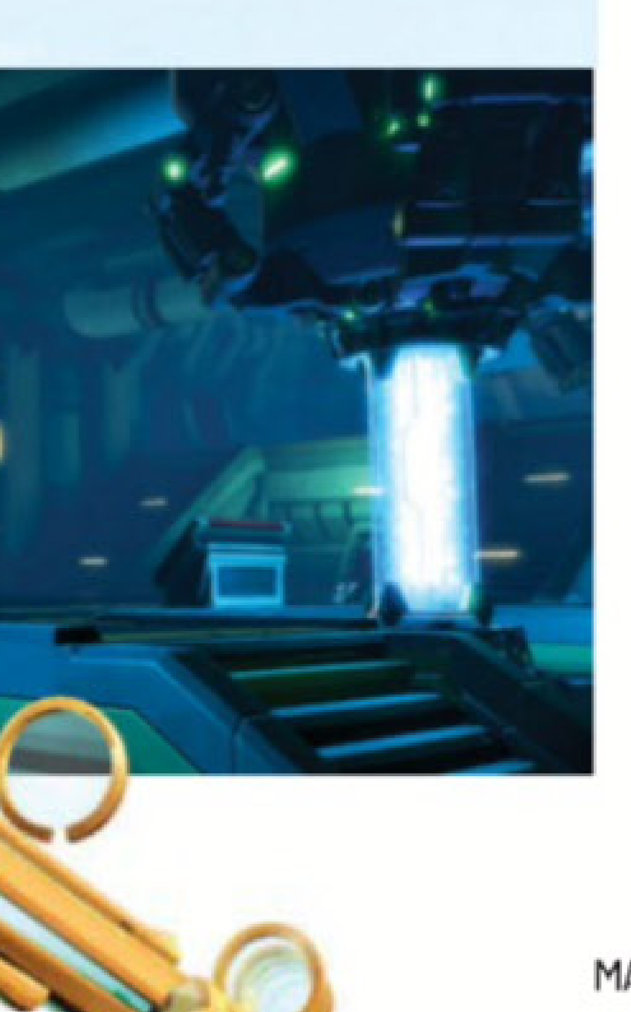
BALANCING FOR MULTIPLAYER-CENTRIC games is difficult. Even the slightest under or overpowered element could throw the entire game into disarray. That's why we were a little worried to hear *Battleborn* would be launching with 25 characters, not to mention multiple skill trees and variables. But Gearbox is confident it will have no problems with balancing when it comes to its competitive and cooperative sides to combat, apparently every character has been reduced down to a numerical element – meaning their stats can be tweaked quickly and efficiently once it's in the hands of players. We'll take its word for now, though *Battleborn* seems like the type of game screaming out for an open-beta.



Can't find a character you like in the first 25? Well, Gearbox has all but confirmed that DLC will continue indefinitely – not unlike *LOL* – or until its popularity wanes, at least.



Despite its MOBA appearance, *Battleborn* is a straight-up shooter at heart. It's all about deft positioning, accurate gunfire and using your abilities to get one over your opponent.



MARQUIS [LLC FACTION]

This is a droid that fancies wearing a suit and bowler hat more than a suit of armour, but don't count it out. An AI upgrade means Marquis is getting virtual insanity, and now engages in combat with a cane-turned-sniper rifle.



OSCAR MIKE [PEACEKEEPERS FACTION]

Oscar Mike is essentially the beginner's character in *Battleborn*, he's the standard FPS template. A space marine who wields frag grenades and assault rifles, not to mention the ability to hammer of dawn enemies from afar.



REYNA [ROGUE FACTION]

The leader of the ragtag Rogue faction, Reyna's combat style involves constantly switching between a pistol in one hand and wearing an energy pellet-firing glove on the other. She can also heal and teleport.





PHOEBE [LLC FACTION]

A robotic inventor blessed with human traits, and part of the family who previously employed Marquis before he went slightly mad. Her arsenal includes a teleporting ability, a set of floating blades and a fearsomely powerful parry move.



Rock Band 4

CONCEPT The world's foremost party rock simulator is back, free from the constraints of publisher deals and traditional triple-A methodology. Be excited.

When it's time to party, we will party hard

In the last few months, we've had both *Guitar Hero* and *Rock Band* unveiled to us once again. Both franchises were met with the same degree of initial fan fervour, followed closely by microscopic levels of study. Fans are running scared – the rhythm action genre, openly missed by lifelong gamers, came back with a bang in 2005, when *Guitar Hero* truly opened the gates for peripheral-based activities.

But then the bubble burst, and took Harmonix along with it. The esteemed developer swore off its patented band emulation games and honed its craft instead, working on smaller projects for the likes of Disney and Ubisoft. So where *Guitar Hero* is taking the genre back to its roots – a *true* score attack game – the newest *Rock Band* instalment is doubling down on its core conceit audience: the party gamers dreaming of putting a band together. Harmonix has repositioned itself to give us *exactly* what we want from a local multiplayer rhythm action game – and we've outlined precisely what that is over the next couple of pages...

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PS4, Xbox One
Origin: USA
Publisher: Harmonix
Developer: In-house
Release: Q4 2015
Players: 1-4

Developer Profile

Harmonix has been making rhythm action games all its life, and has proved it knows the genre inside out – from peripheral-based efforts to pad-based games to Kinect-reliant composing simulators. Developing with a distinct love for music, Harmonix has proven itself a master of the genre time after time.

Developer History

Frequency **2001 [PS2]**
Guitar Hero **2005 [PS2]**
Rock Band **2007 [PS3, Xbox 360]**

High Point

Rock Band 3 showed that Harmonix not only knew how to make a great party game, but also a perfectly functional score-attacking vessel, something that had us chasing high scores for months on end.

1 YOU'LL RECOGNIZE THE CORE GAMEPLAY...

THOSE CENTRAL note paths are back, with the scrolling button prompts for the guitars and drums and that traditional karaoke track for the singer. You'll still have a pretty similar HUD outside of that, too – giving you all the information you need without detracting from the simulation running on- (and off-) stage. As far as UI goes, you'll still have access to setlists, and all the music selection and previewing will be as intuitive as you remember. You play through tracks, gain points and activate your multipliers as before, too: as far as gameplay goes, very little has been altered, really. And thanks to track importing, much of the playlist will feel pretty familiar as you jump back into the experience.





5

"Since the announcement of Rock Band 4, we've been thrilled by the overwhelmingly positive response of passionate fans and gamers worldwide"

DARREN RICHARDSON MAD CATZ

2 ...BUT YOU'LL LIKE THE NEW FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

A LOT more has certainly been stacked on top of what made the game great in the first place, though. If you're a singer, you're no longer bound by what the original (and obviously inferior) vocalists of the tracks did; on Hard and Expert, you can improvise a little, get more lively, shout, dampen the dynamic… and the game will reward you for it. The same goes with dynamic drum fills – don't like the way it was done originally? Do a double-bass fill instead, or ride that hi-hat for all it's worth. The game will recognise that you're still performing (as long as you're in time with the beat) and score you respectively.

3 IT'S MORE INTUITIVE THAN PREVIOUS TITLES…

SO YOU'VE constructed your setlist, you've just finished blasting out The Rolling Stones' 'Paint It Black', and you're all energised and ready to break into something a bit more metal. But your bassist, the slacker, wants to tone it down a little bit, play something mellow before you break out Coheed and Cambria's 'Welcome Home' to round the whole thing off. That might have caused a fight before, but now there's dynamic voting in-between tracks on a setlist, allowing you to change up what you will be playing next (which can be categorised into artist, genre and also decade selections). Talk about real-life band dynamics!

4 …AND IT ALLOWS YOU TO LIVE OUT THAT *FULL* ROCK STAR FANTASY

YOU'RE IN your living room, sweat pouring from your de-shirted torso down onto the frets, as the final chords of that last track fade on the stack of amps (well, your TV speakers). Your guitarist tunes his instrument – or, as it were, checks his buttons are still working – and you scream down the mic, in your best Bruce Dickinson voice, "Scream for me, Donington!" The crowd goes nuts, and you start your next track with a couple hundred bonus points. Who knows, keep that initial momentum up and the crowd could even demand an encore of you once you wrap up your (supposedly) final track. Hopefully you've saved one.

5 OH, AND IT'LL SUPPORT ALL YOUR PREVIOUS ROCK BAND ADD-ONS

THAT'S NOT just limited to any old equipment you've got knocking around your humble abode, either – Harmonix appreciates that its fans have invested pretty heavily in the old Guitar Hero and Rock Band IPs, and is keen to support the loyal players as thanks. As such, the studio is crunching hard to ensure all the last gen's hardware will be compatible with the new games, and any platform-specific content you bought for *Rock Band* 1-3 will work in the new game. So that means, in theory, you can have up to 2000 songs instantly playable, before you even get to the on-disc soundtrack. Now *that* is fan service.

Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 5

CONCEPT ■ The tenth game in a long-running series, but the first since 2007, and technically a follow-up to 2002 game. Skating is back!

Don't bail on us now

Picture the scene: kids everywhere are talking about the latest game in a beloved series, and how gnarly and bodacious it is. Elsewhere, frustrated wannabe rock stars are getting their groove on with the latest in a long line of plastic instruments, banging out *Mr Brightside* by The Killers, while elsewhere, the more mature folk are killing noobs in the latest *Call Of Duty*.

No, we're not talking about the 2007-2009 era, this picture is one that we could well be seeing this holiday, as *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater* is coming back with a fifth instalment (though it isn't actually the fifth at all, confusingly being a sequel to the fourth game from 2002), that looks to take the series back to basics, while introducing some new elements, and old favourites, too.

And it's interesting that it's decided to take on the *Pro Skater* name, but it also makes sense. *Ride* and *Shred* were peripheral-based, and did incredibly poorly, so it's no shock to see Activision distance itself from that offshoot series, instead pulling on our nostalgia laden memories of the main series that was so popular.

Plus, as you might expect, Tony Hawk himself will be playable, but there's also a host of skateboarding celebrities included, such as Riley Hawk (Tony's 22-year-old son – don't you feel old now?), Andrew Reynolds, Chris Cole, David Gonzalez, Leticia Bufoni, and lots more. You can create your own character, too, which might be the preferred choice given that there's an online component this time around.

/// Robomodo has created the online multiplayer with drop-in/drop-out skate sessions that let you level up your skater (though you can do that offline, too), and take on your friends in competitive matches – as long as you're on Xbox One or PlayStation 4, that is, as there will be no online in the 360 and PS3 versions. One exciting prospect is the idea that you can also create your own skate-park, and share online with the community. It's too early to tell, but we're hoping to be able to create some outlandish environments, with enormous bowls and insanely long grinds.

Elsewhere, specific missions will let you shoot projectiles and use power-ups, which certainly seems like the developer stamping its own take on things. We're not entirely sure if shooting fireballs is going to work in a *Tony Hawk's* game just yet, but at least it's something new, instead of just recycling old ideas for a quick cash-in.

Tony Hawk's has always been a series that indulges its fans. While those of us who don't skateboard will likely still find it amusing, it's hard to say whether the language has dated in such a way that it'll be difficult to bear. Back in the early Noughties, we were all for using words like "shred", or "ripping", and although "dude" has stayed in our lexicon, outside of skating circles, it'll either make the new game feel dated or it'll be something that gives us a happy twinge of nostalgia.

But Robomodo doesn't have the most stellar of histories. Though it wasn't terrible, *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater HD* was a poor HD remaster. That said, it was better than its earlier efforts (*Ride* and *Shred*), so it does appear that it is honing its skills over time. Originally, *Tony Hawk's* was under the care of Neversoft, who moved onto the *Guitar Hero* series, before being disbanded as a studio in 2014. It seems as though *Pro Skater* is being treated with a little more caution than *Guitar Hero*, and it's tricky to know whether this is just Activision dipping its toes in the water to see if there's still a market for the series or if it plans on really getting behind this genre again. We would tend to hope the latter is true as we sorely miss these kind of 3D score attack games.

So there's reason to be concerned, but also reason to be excited. *Pro Skater* is a beloved series for a reason; doing kickflips and ollies on the streets once again should be a massive draw for fans still out there. Who knows, maybe EA will even revive the fantastic *Skate* series to compete and it'll truly be 2009 again. We can only hope.

> "Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 5 takes the old-school attitude of the original games online in a big way"
> TONY HAWK PROFESSIONAL SKATEBOARDER

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PS3, PS4, Xbox 360, Xbox One
Origin: USA
Publisher: Activision
Developer: Robomodo and Disruptive Games
Release: TBC 2015
Players: Multiple (Online)

Developer Profile

Robomodo has plenty of history developing *Tony Hawk's* games to middling critical response. Most recently, it was behind the HD remake of the original *Pro Skater*. It also made the lowest rated to date (*Ride*),which was also the one that included a skateboard peripheral you could actually ride.

Developer History

Tony Hawk: Ride **Multi [2009]**
Tony Hawk: Shred **Multi [2010]**
Tony Hawk's Pro Skater HD **Multi [2012]**
Hunger Games: Catching Fire Panem Run **iOS, Android [2013]**

High Point

Despite average reception, Robomodo's HD remake made us realise we wanted more *Tony Hawk's* in our lives.





■ Above: We wonder if Tony himself rolls back the years (he's nearly 50 now!) by playing as his son and hitting the half-pipe.



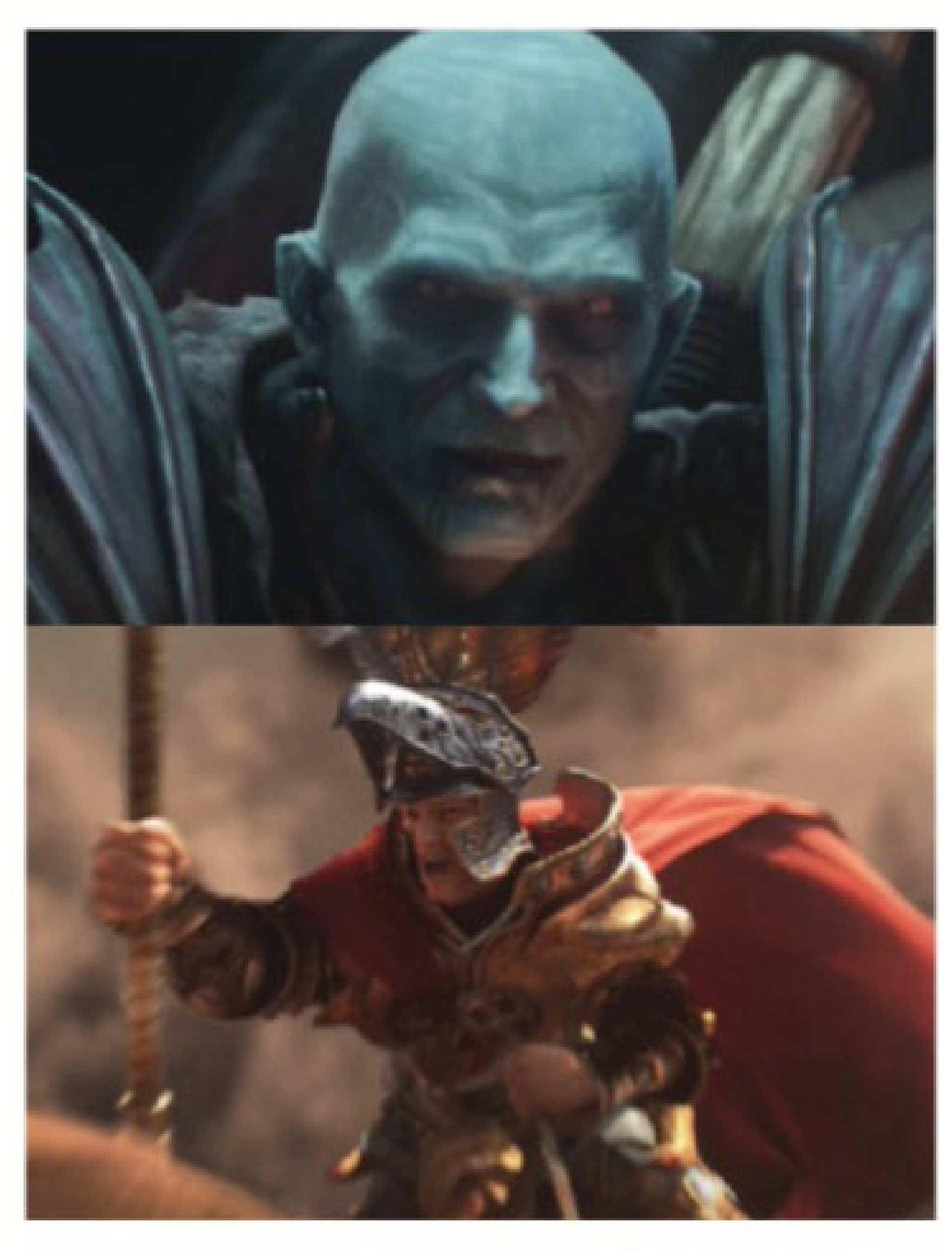
■ Above: Flaming grind rails. What on earth could go wrong? This is the level of silliness we like to see from a *Tony Hawk's* title if we're really being honest. Left: If we can't collect tapes in a warehouse, we'll riot. Or perhaps just write a sternly worded letter. Below: The new game features some pretty background visuals, but the whole thing looks a little lacking in the graphics department at the moment.

THE COMPLETE PACKAGE

AS THE *PRO SKATER* series went on, additional skills were added that gave us more options on the board. In *Pro Skater 5*, you'll be able to do manuals and reverts from the very start. This means you'll have freedom to grind rails, perform flips and aerials, and generally ride your board to achieve and maintain combos in a natural way. In previous games, successfully doing all of this adds to your special meter, which in turn lets you perform a signature move. The fun of *Pro Skater* is always in the perpetual motion of skateboarding: keep moving, keep scoring, and keep tricking. That's the *Tony Hawk's* way.



"A greater threat still whispers in the winds from the north. The fabric of reality itself begins to rend and buckle…"
PRESS RELEASE CREATIVE ASSEMBLY



The Emperor of Man, Karl Franz, makes a pretty central appearance in the announcement, all but confirming the Empire as a playable faction.

Total War: Warhammer

CONCEPT Something has riled up the Orks (again) and they march on the strongholds of men, determined to finally take down the Empire

The new model army

Reality itself is under threat and, carried by the northern winds, a malign energy poisons the air. Off in the distance, Orks tear apart villages and pillage Empire lands, but that doesn't matter. Right now, there are more pressing concerns. Something dark – something Chaotic – stirs in the land, and as your armies mobilise, you can't help but be taken in by this dire sense of dread.

So begins *Total War: Warhammer* – a union of lore, mechanics and technology that makes perfect sense. The tabletop game hasn't seen a decent RTS game using its properties in *years* – the closest we had was the *Dawn Of War* series, which is over a decade old now. Enter Sega, and Creative Assembly. The *Total War* engine doesn't really have to undergo *any* modifications to run a *Warhammer* game; it's pseudo-top-down, it's unit- and regiment-based and it's always had a toy town feel to it. The game is in the early stages of its reveal, but we do know a few fundamental things.

First of all, we *know* Orks, Goblins, Dwarves and Vampire Counts will be playable factions, with the Chaos filling the role of antagonists and The Empire standing in as either support or another playable faction in and of itself. We wouldn't be surprised to see the Skaven and Elves (of all varieties) turn up at some point, too; tying into the *Warhammer* world-wide event 'The End Times' that's been enacted in recent lore.

If the latest announcement is anything to go by, we also know that human characters will be able to summon magic, too. Now, in the *Warhammer* lore, there are eight schools of magic that humans can call upon in battle, so we're intrigued to see how far Creative Assembly is going to replicate this complex mechanic from the source tabletop game. Bear in mind, human (and by extension, non-human) magic is a pretty lethal force, able to wipe out entire regiments at a time – it could be implemented in a similar fashion to the nukes in *Command & Conquer*; huge cool downs for one-time use.

The announcement also reveals a dragon, a couple of ogres and great war machines marching on an Empire stronghold. *Total War* iterated its siege mechanics with every release, so it makes sense that sieges will be a central part of *Total War: Warhammer* – each army in the lore has access to terrifying hardware. Plus, the sheer thrill of riding a dragon into battle is something *every* game needs to make a bigger deal of.

These are Arachnarok Spiders – creatures Goblins worship like gods and ride like tanks. We're fully expecting them to be playable (ridable) in the final version of the game.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC
Origin: UK
Publisher: Sega
Developer: Creative Assembly
Release: TBC 2015
Players: 1

Developer Profile

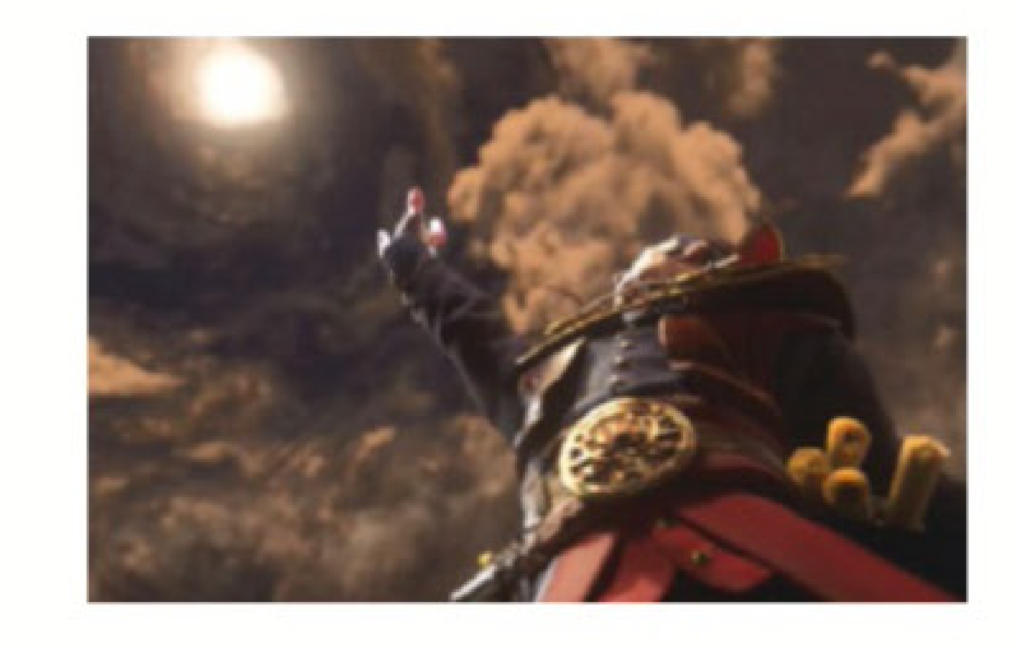
Operating since 1987, The Creative Assembly has made its name in recent years as a dab hand at real-time strategy games – its most notable franchise being *Total War*. *Alien: Isolation* was a curious departure for the studio, but one we ultimately loved. We hope to see more in that field.

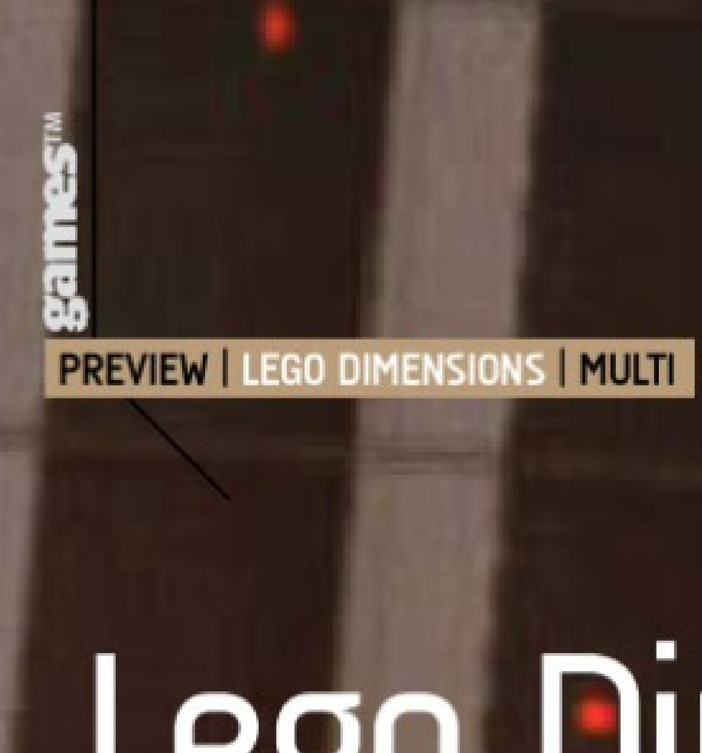
Developer History

Rome: Total War **2004 [PC]**
Viking: Battle for Asgard **2008 [PS3, Xbox 360, PC]**
Stormrise **2009 [PS3, Xbox 360, PC]**

High Point

Alien: Isolation is the best survival horror game we've seen in years – a smart, terrifying take on the genre, complete with authentic film tie-ins.





Lego Dimensions

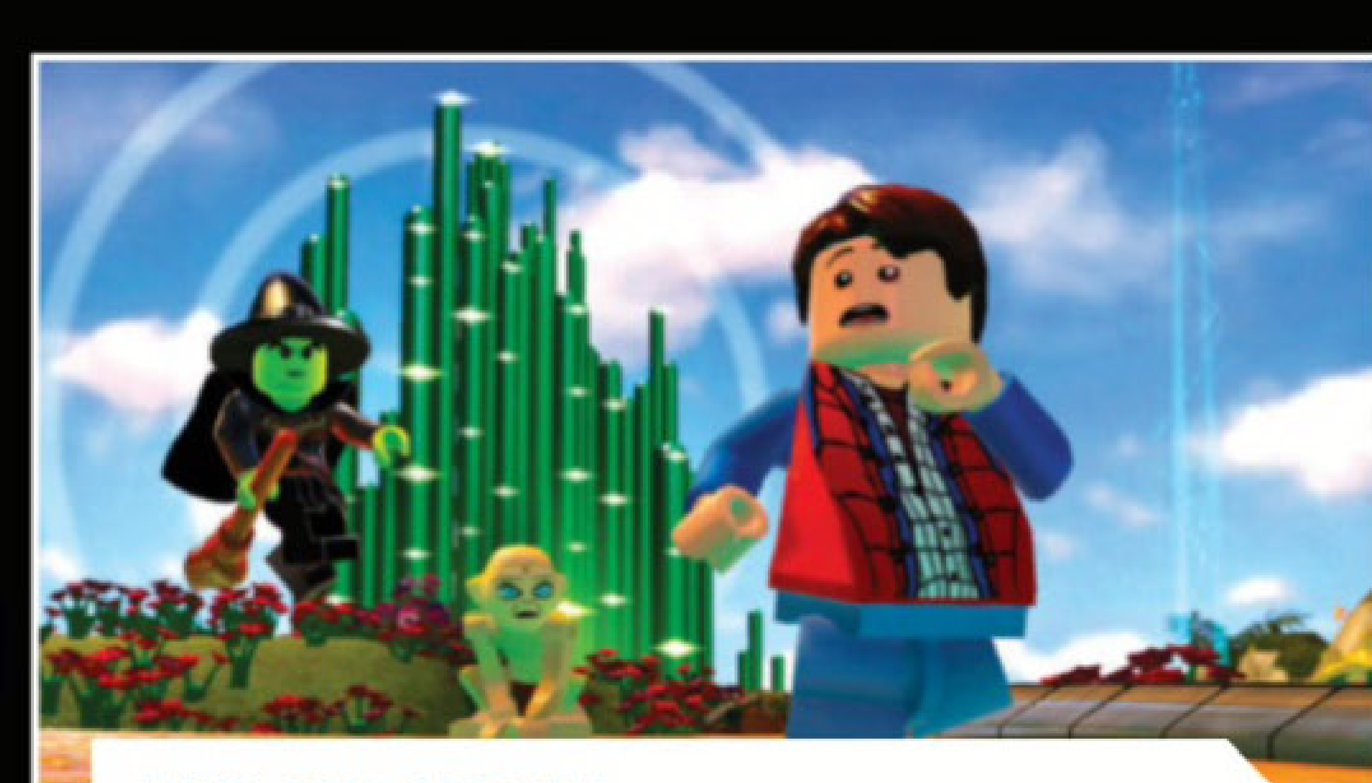
CONCEPT A masked villain has invaded a variety of your favourite *Lego*-based worlds, intent on wreaking havoc on its denizens. Only their combined forces can stop it

Our wallets are bricking it…

If the likes of *Skylanders* or *Disney Infinity* have never appealed to you, and you thought you were safe – free from the sinkhole of cash that is collectible toy-based videogames, think again. Maybe you even managed to sidestep the amiibo craze, scrolling through your Twitter feed and laughing at all the Nintendo devotees that are trying *so hard* to secure their precious plastic cargo before they sell out.

But then, one fateful day, Warner Bros. Interactive and TT Games parts the earth, rips a hole in space-time and from another dimension and issue forth a single *Lego* figure, dropping it delicately into your hand. It's Chell – you know, from *Portal* – and she's holding that famous Portal Gun. You resist, but you can't hold out, you feel something inside of you change.

That's it, you're hooked. That habit you once kicked as a kid is back, you're back in the *Lego* horse, and there's nothing you can do to fight it. Give in. Give in and read all about the various worlds *Lego Dimensions* will take you to…



MIX AND MATCH

SIMILAR TO rival *Disney Infinity*, *Lego Dimensions* is going to let you mix and match your purchased play sets to create mash-ups you'd only ever be able to conceive in your imagination. "Imagine putting *Lego* Gollum from *The Lord Of The Rings* behind the wheel of the *Lego* DeLorean time machine in New Ninjago City – the creative play is endless," explains TT Games' creative director Jon Burton. It's a fascinating proposition, and one that captures child-like creativity.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PS3, PS4, Wii U, Xbox 360, Xbox One
Origin: UK
Publisher: Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment
Developer: TT Games
Release: 29 September 2015
Players: 1-TBC

Developer Profile

Operating since 1990, Traveller's Tales (now TT Games) has proved itself as a master of the licensed game – in more recent years, though, the studio has carved out a niche for itself as the *Lego* studio.

Developer History

Puggsy
1993 [Amiga, Mega-CD, Mega Drive]
Sonic R
1998 [Sega Saturn]
Lego Rock Band
2009 [PS3, 360, Wii, DS]
Lego Marvel Super Heroes
2013 [Multi]

High Point

Lego Marvel Super Heroes had such a broad appeal – all the infantile glee of *Lego* mixed with the universal appeal of the Marvel roster. Fortunately, TT Games didn't squander the opportunity it had, making a truly solid game.



KEEPING IT IN THE FAMILY

■ UNLIKE *SKYLANDERS*, *Lego Dimensions* has the advantage of being able to draw on as many franchises as it likes, and when you consider the wide berth of properties Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment has under its belt, that's *a lot* of potential content. *Lego Dimensions* has already been confirmed to contain supporting characters from the *Lego Movie* – we wouldn't be surprised to see the game use the play sets idea the movie introduced to justify the vast quantity of worlds its including.

THOSE ABOUT TO ROCK

■ IT'S NOT just the various play sets and franchises that'll lace *Lego Dimensions* with variety. Considering how different each *Lego* game has been since the *Star Wars* games, we're expecting to see a *ton* of different gameplay mechanics. We've got Marty McFly rocking out on a guitar from *Lego Rock Band* here, so can we expect rhythm action sections? And the RPG bits from *Lego The Hobbit*? Sure, why not? There's so much potential for constantly evolving gameplay and that is the most exciting thing.

Below: Minions are no longer your army, but you can summon them as solo champions. Brown and Red champions are good aggressive classes, Greens poison enemies and Blues heal you.





INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC, PS4, Xbox One
Origin: UK
Publisher: Codemasters
Developer: In-house
Release: 25th August 2015
Players: 1-4 (local & online)

Developer Profile

More recently known for its racing simulators, Codemasters has been a staple in the British games industry for nearly three decades. Having published the original *Overlord* games, including spin-off titles for the Nintendo DS and Wii, it's stepped in to pick up where Triumph Studios left off in 2009.

Developer History

Colin McRae: Dirt
2007 [PC, PS3 Xbox 360]
GRID
2008 [PC, PS3, Xbox 360]
Operation Flashpoint: Dragon Rising
2009 [PC, PS3, Xbox360]
F1 (series)
2009-2014 [PC, PS3, Xbox 360]

High Point

Though recognised for publishing and developing in an array of genres, Codemasters has built a strong reputation for producing enjoyable racing games on mainstream platforms.

Overlord: Fellowship of Evil

CONCEPT A not-quite-sequel to Triumph Studios' *Overlord* series, where players team up to pummel the forces of good as four classes of dark warrior

Sorry, Minions – the master can't make it to the party

Nothing upsets a fan base quite so much as a title that appears deceptive. Granted, this is a sequel based in the same world as the previous two *Overlord* games: its got the adorable gremlin-like Minions, their leader Gnarl and presumably the trademark British humour we all love, courtesy of writer Rhianna Pratchett, but no actual Overlord. No hulking, ominously silent mass of steel with glowing eyes. No small army of Minions who swarm enemies with homicidal glee, proudly adorning themselves with fallen foes' armour and weapons. That could be problematic.

Indeed, the Minions are what made the original Overlord games so interesting. There are four kinds, named after their colours, with Browns and Reds forming the bulk of your fighting force as melee fighters and fiery archers respectively. Then the Greens, who are specialised backstabbers and assassins, while the Blues act as healing units.

The Minions make a return in *Fellowship of Evil* as upgradeable 'champions' players can call to their aid in battle. While it's certain that each kind of Minion will have different effects on players and enemies, it doesn't look like the tactical approach to combat has been retained.

Instead of the titular Overlord we have four 'Netherghūls': resurrected, powerful devotees to evildoing who are keen to fight off the encroaching touch of goodness, which is beginning to reach even the darkest places beneath the earth. Flowers, crystals and cute fauna are springing up everywhere. It's your mission to push these things back with extreme prejudice. You can do this alone, but *Fellowship Of Evil* is clearly aiming towards a co-operative, uncomplicated venture, if the top-down MOBA-esque gameplay and simplified HUD are anything to go by. There is loot. There are upgrades to be distributed. There is teamwork.

> "The Netherghūls are a last ditch attempt to claw back ground before a new Overlord can be created"
> RHIANNA PRATCHETT WRITER

"Of course we've still got the story there," says Carl Johnson, chief designer. "The story's a big part of it, but we wanted to make the gameplay itself much more immediate, much more focused on combat, but very accessible too." Pratchett's writing is a key selling point, as every Overlord enthusiast recognises that it's her world and her characters. For some, that might be enough to justify a twinge of excitement despite the gameplay alterations.

Most, however, have reacted poorly to *Fellowship*. Sure, it looks more accessible and follows a format that makes use of the lore, the humour and – most importantly – the Minions. But in attuning itself to marketable, mainstream desires, the sequel risks losing everything that made its forebears interesting. Let's hope that *Overlord* hasn't been scrubbed entirely of its uniqueness.



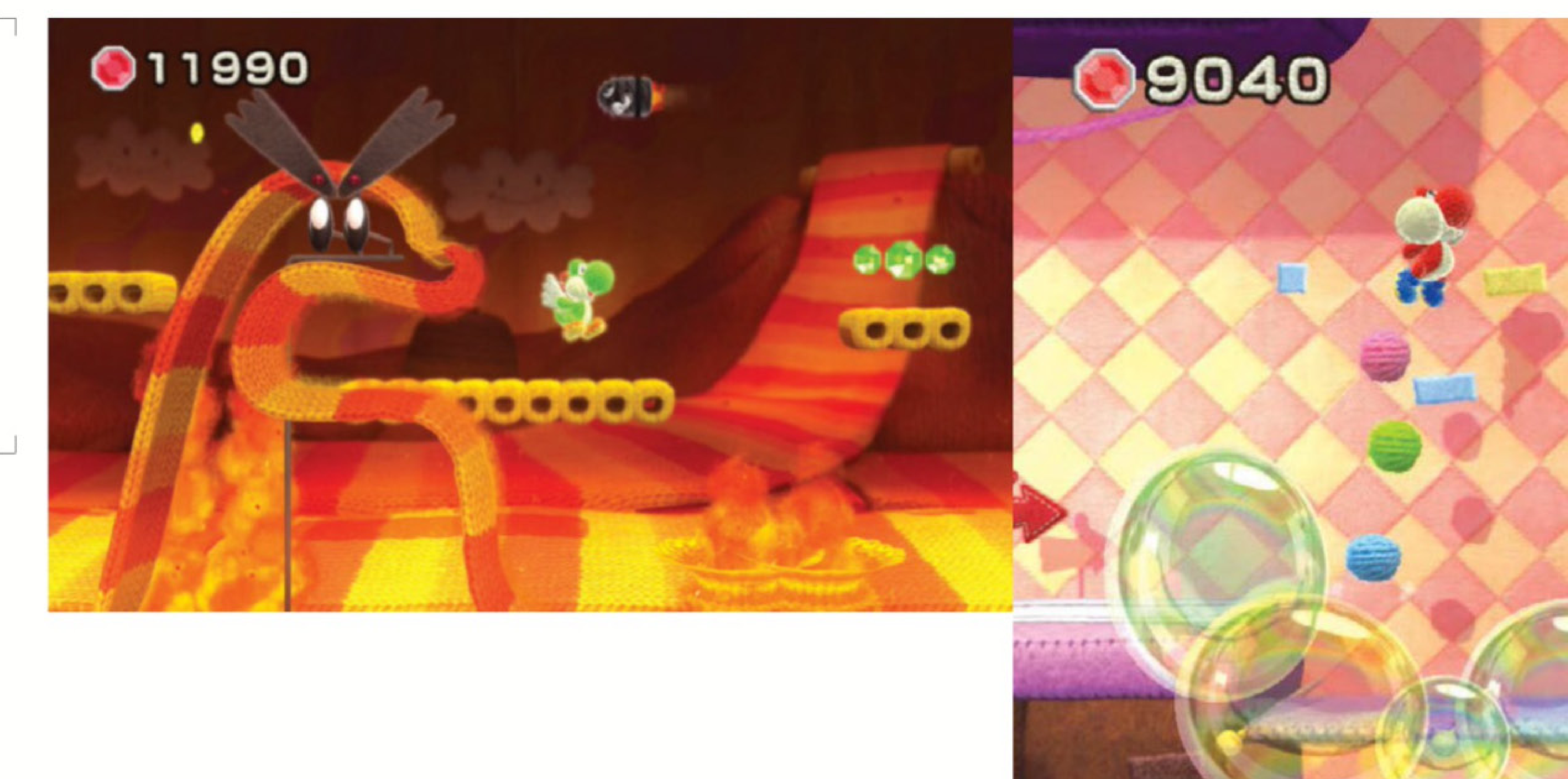
Above: These are the Netherghūls: four Overlord stand-ins serve as the player characters this time around, each with their unique fighting style.



SOLO CO-OP?

THE CO-OP GAMEPLAY lets you gobble up each other to then throw to hard-to-reach platforms or against enemies. Plus, one cool amiibo feature that's been revealed is that you can scan in the special woolly Yoshi amiibo and add a second little dino to your game. Now you're controlling two Yoshis simultaneously, gaining many of the benefits of co-op on your own. It's a nice little idea that means even solo players can enjoy some of the deeper gameplay mechanics available in the game. Playing with someone else though will always be the superior option.

Above: The way in which enemies have been reimagined for the yarn universe is pretty fun, such as these crabs made of purses and thread-cutters. Our favourites are still the Shy-Guys though. Right: Mellow mode gives Yoshi wings and lets you traverse levels with far more ease than the dino's typical leg kicking motion can. You can switch back and forth mid-level whenever you like.



Yoshi's Woolly World

CONCEPT ■ Classic *Yoshi* gameplay gets a modern Nintendo twist as the woolly design of Kirby is tested out on Mario's best pal

Tangled up in green

This game is tougher than it looks. We know it looks soft and cuddly, much like its hero, but it's actually got exactly the kind of escalating challenge in its gameplay that Nintendo platforming fans would demand. And while it may have borrowed its art style from Good-Feel's previous platformer starring Kirby, it doesn't take long to feel the classic *Yoshi* brand of adventure at the tips of your fingers. The formula is sound and Good-Feel appears to be nailing it.

The key is that there's some real platforming challenge behind the pastel visuals. The classic egg aiming and throwing mechanics, the platforms you need to make appear, using Yoshi's leg-kicking motion to get just a little more air time; it all combines into the kind of nuanced platforming we would expect and demand from such a game. The fact that it's all packaged with such imaginative visuals and catchy sound design only enhances the experience.

Playing through the first few worlds of this new adventure, we were impressed by the level of originality in what at first would appear to be a borrowed art style. We're fans of Yoshi's classic sketched look from back in his SNES days, but since the series has followed Mario into 2.5D some of that has been lost. The yarn recreations of Yoshi and all the classic enemies he faces actually makes for a really good fit. These games have always been cute and having the worlds made of fabric, buttons and wool only enhances that atmosphere.

The bosses in particular are a highlight so far, both in terms of design and challenge. It's a who's who of classic battles such as Burt the Bashful and if you remember their attack patterns from back in the day you'll be pleased to discover it's as fun to take on these giant versions of your regular foes as ever. If anything, the yarn base of this game has a tendency to make everything seem a little more logical in an odd sort of way. Throwing an 'egg' to bind the snout of a fire-breathing dog has a little more sense to it in this context as does yanking on the thread of Bashful Burt's trousers to embarrass him, not that reality is a major concern here.

/// Perhaps the most important element that hasn't been lost through this change in style is Yoshi's appeal as the centre of the game. His leg kicking, single-bite swallowing, and egg-spawning remain as smile-inducing as ever. Is there a sound effect in gaming cuter than Yoshi struggling to reach a ledge? We don't think so. And watching him waddle along made of wool, walking on pulsating sheets of fabric that mimic a rolling sand dune, unravelling wool walls like he's sucking up a bowl of spaghetti; it's all so in keeping with this iconic star that everything just clicks into place. Since the first Yoshi starring vehicle, *Super Mario World 2: Yoshi's Island*, these games have attempted to break out from traditional Nintendo visuals and present something with a little more child-like innocence. In that first game it was a crayon-based sketch style and now its an arts and crafts wool base. In both cases it just helps Yoshi stand out even more as a unique star in the Nintendo roster.

Good-Feel has clearly been doing its homework in building *Yoshi's Woolly World*. All the key elements of this characters strongest games are here to enjoy, enhanced and embellished by this well-tested new look. Structurally, the small hidden objects and challenges means there's plenty to go back and find on a second play through, too.

> "Gobble friends and turn them into eggs. Then toss them into hard-to-reach heights and secret depths"
>
> PRESS RELEASE NINTENDO

Already we can sense this game is going to demand a lot of revisiting to attain the highest ratings for each stage and unlock all of the different woollen Yoshi designs there are to find in the game. Yoshi has always had that gameplay, but in this mobile gaming age it's a structure that feels more relevant than ever. So while this may seem like your typical Nintendo kids fodder, it promises to deliver a far more satisfying experience than you might imagine. The Wii U is quietly becoming a console to care about.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: Wii U
Origin: Japan
Publisher: Nintendo
Developer: Good-Feel
Release: June 2015
Players: 1-2

Developer Profile

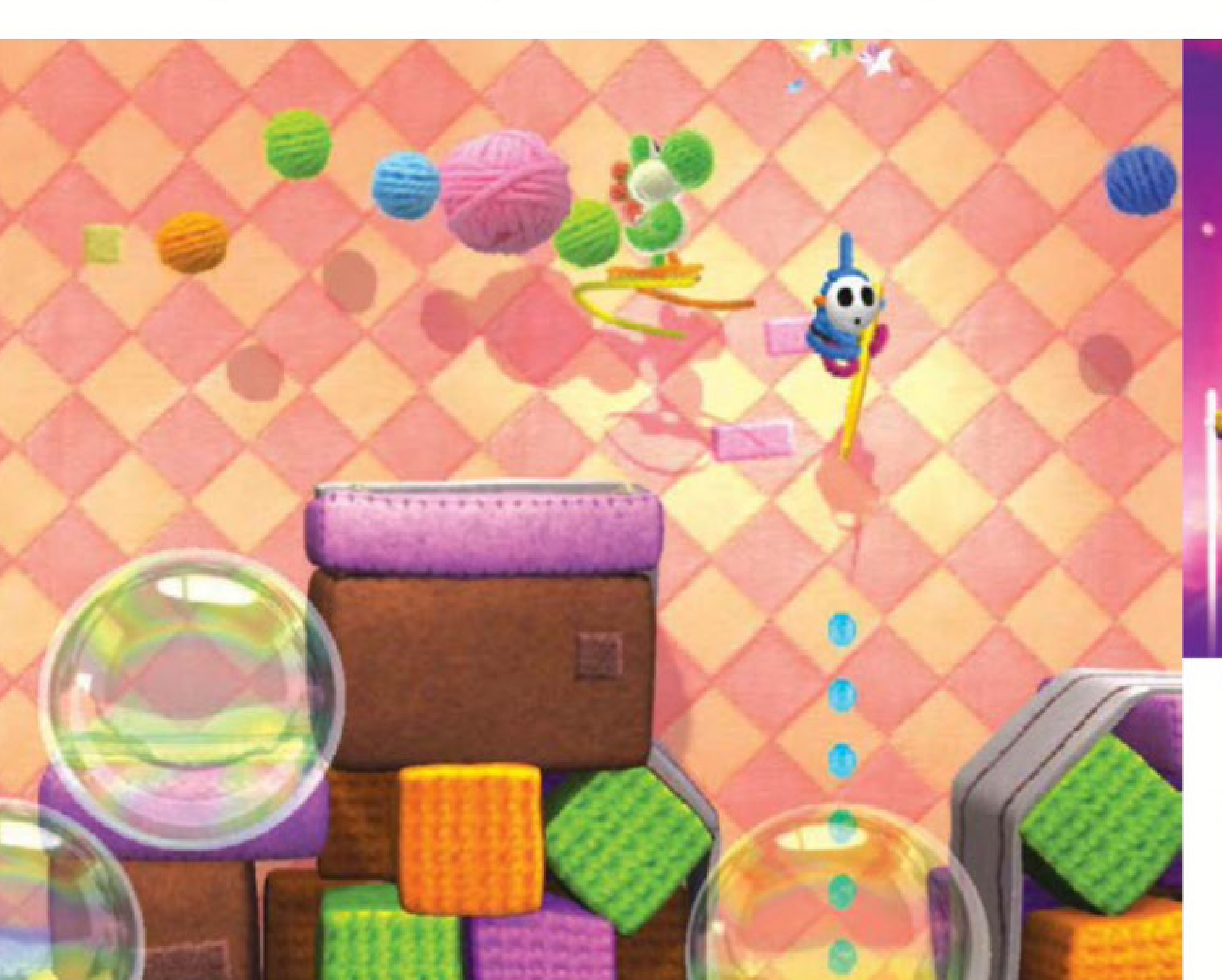
Good-Feel started out as a developer of educational software released exclusively in Japan on Nintendo DS and aimed at young children just starting their schooling. Its first full gaming release was *Wario Land: Shake It!* for Wii. Since then it's been given lots of innovative Nintendo side projects.

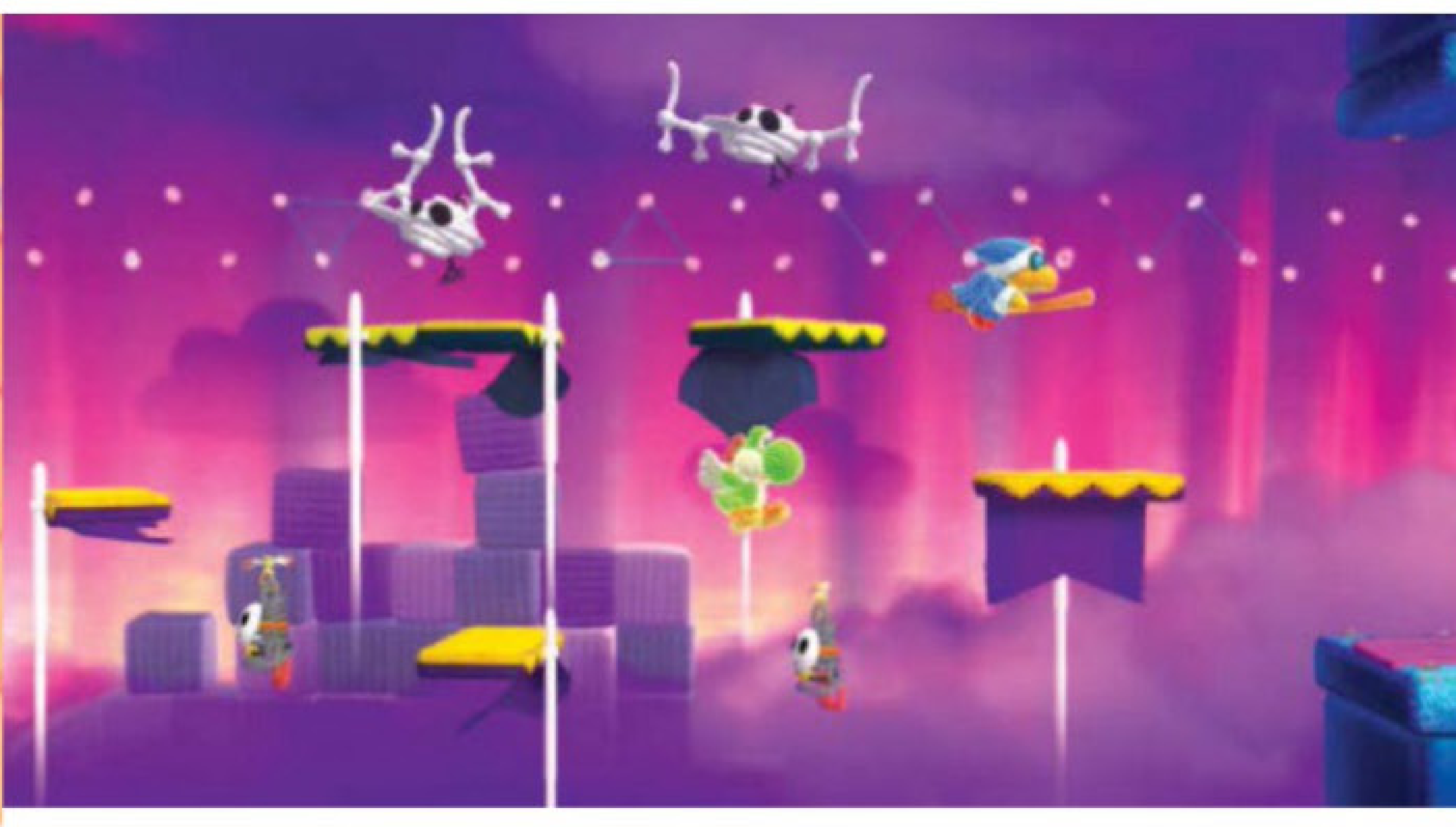
Developer History

Wario Land: Shake It! **2008 [DS]**
Kirby's Epic Yarn **2010 [Wii]**
Wii Play: Motion **2011 [Wii]**


High Point

Mario & Luigi: Dream Team is the best selling title Good-Feel has released so far. It was a little on the short side, but had some great moments and an excellent soundtrack.





■ Left: The music and sound effects of *Yoshi's Woolly World* are really quite special. Yoshi has always been one of the best in Nintendo's stall for audio treats.



Inset Sweden is just one of many locales the game will use for its tracks – those snow-drifts look like wonderful obstacles to tackle

Inset Milestone's work with lighting can be seen in the Mexican rally stages, too – we hope this perpetual dusk lasts the whole race, every race.

Sébastien Loeb Rally Evo

CONCEPT ■ A rally racing game that wants to take you around the world, and show you what it's really like to race like Seb Loeb

For those that like their hairpins dirty

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC, PS4, Xbox One
Origin: Italy
Publisher: Milestone S.r.l
Developer: In-house
Release: Q3 2015
Players: 1

Developer Profile

Based in Milan, Milestone has been operating since 1994, when it was set up as a small studio called Graffiti. Honing its craft on MD-DOS, the company began making licensed games and racing games for the PC and PlayStation in 2000.

Developer History

Screamer **1995 [MS-DOS]**
MotoGP '08 **2008 [Wii, PC, PS2, PS3, Xbox 360]**
Ride **2015 [PS, PS3, PS4, Xbox 360, Xbox One]**

High Point

All of the developer's racing games hit on that really technical simulation side of racers, but it was *MotoGP 13* that held our attention the longest.

The *World Rally Championship* games – though constant – needed a change; for the hardcore audience, the series was a yearly purchase, without a doubt. But, if the sales figures are to be believed, something was going wrong, and slowly but surely, the games were getting less attractive to new customers.

So rebranding the game to *Sébastien Loeb Rally Evo* is more than just a marketing move to bring in fans of rally driving's biggest star. It's a change in tone, a change in direction, a change of tack. The rally genre is one that has always had a special appeal to gamers, dating back to the days of *Colin McRae* and *V-Rally* and it feels like the time is right for such titles to make an impact on this new generation of hardware. We spoke to Paolo Bertoni, art director on *Sébastien Loeb Rally Evo*, to find out what Milestone wants to achieve with this brand new franchise while pushing the genre in some interesting new directions.

Did Sébastien Loeb himself contribute anything specific in particular to the game, besides his name?

Yes, absolutely! We are continuing to work very closely with Sébastien Loeb at every stage. Much in the same way as our work on *MXGP* and *MotoGP*, our close relationships with those involved in the actual motorsports themselves allow incredible access to individuals who can give the kind of insight which we wouldn't otherwise have.

For example, we can strive to make sure that the physics (the reproduction of handling, traction, speed, engineering) is just so – but there's also the matter of does something 'feel right'? Does it accurately convey the experience that those involved in the sport experience?

Sébastien Loeb is able to test the game at numerous stages, and will continue to test – and gives us invaluable feedback on the experience and suggestions on where and how

> "We have decided to push the envelope with a title that goes beyond the canon of licensed games"
> LUISA BIXIO, MILESTONE

we can improve the feel of the game. He's one of rally's greatest ever drivers – it is very important for us to take his opinions on board.

What has the new generation of hardware allowed you to do in this game that couldn't be done previously in such titles?

The new console generation comes with more power compared to the previous one, of course, so it opens up more possibilities in terms of computing power, graphics, texture detail, shading, etc… In this way we have from one side the chance to provide a better in-game visual and from the other hand a more accurate physics model. Plus, we have all the sharing features provided by the new consoles.

We've seen rally games lean towards simulation and arcade action. Where would you place this game on that scale? Is it more for hardcore or casual players?


It is a good question. Of course at Milestone we have a history of trying to deliver a simulation experience – but we are always conscious of not alienating players, scaring less experienced players away. We have a philosophy where it's not about making it either arcade or sim – or somewhere in the middle; it's about catering for all tastes.

With *MXGP* and *MotoGP* – we offer an entry point. An accessible – not arcade-like but 'simpler' – simulation model that eases players into the game, while still offering a challenge. As players improve, they can begin to scale the physics and handling up in stages until they reach a full simulation level – turning off assists, say, or removing the ideal trajectory or making manual gear changes.

Some players will never feel comfortable with a full simulation, and that's okay – they can tweak the setting to their own taste. Others will of course always demand the maximum challenge possible, and it's important for us to deliver that for them.

And we understand that the physics have been completely redone since your last game – can you talk about why that's the case, and how you rebuilt the engine?

The physics have always been a key point for Milestone – some of the factors that the new engine can take into consideration are improvements of gyroscopic forces on vehicles. Revised aids system to make them feel less invasive. We also have more control over the physics system, taking into account an improved suspension system, how different gear systems work and also how tyres work and grip on various surfaces and of course, how the car behaves in reacting to the environment around it.



Inset: It's not just dirt that can be ripped off the roads – your cars can also throw up a lot of dust, a potential hazard for racers trying to get past you?

LISTING THE TRACKS

MILESTONE TAKES GREAT pride in how it's dealing with rally tracks – taking real life locations and turning them into 3D arenas for players to manoeuvre around, taking care not to mess their cars up too badly on the deformable terrain.

"For us it's all about authenticity," explains Bertoni. "So we took cars out onto the courses with a camera and recorded the entire runs. It's then up to the team to try and recreate that as accurately as possible. We want people who know the courses to be able to play them and recognise where they are, to feel that it's a strong representation of the real courses."

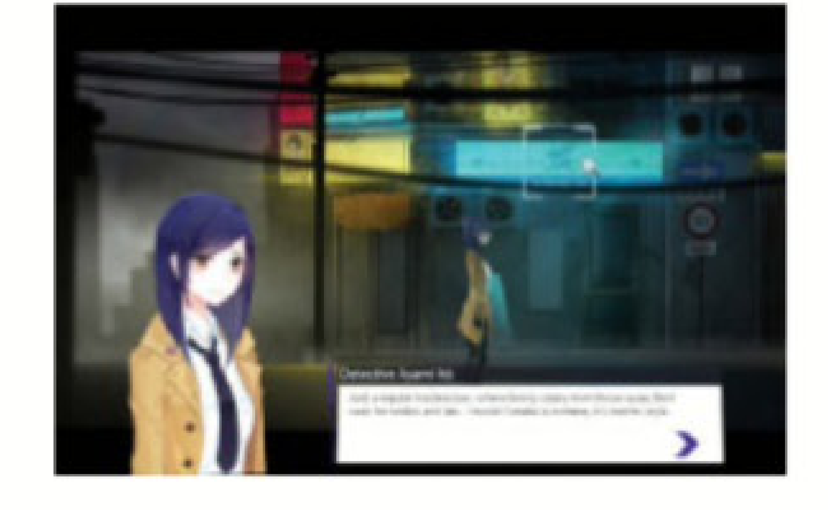
This technique has gameplay implications as well as visual ones, though: "This level of authenticity makes the tracks very narrow – and this offers the game a great intensity and a real feeling of tension at high speed – as it should for a rally game!"

SHOWCASE

MORE TITLES TO WATCH FOR ON THE GAMING HORIZON

TOKYO DARK

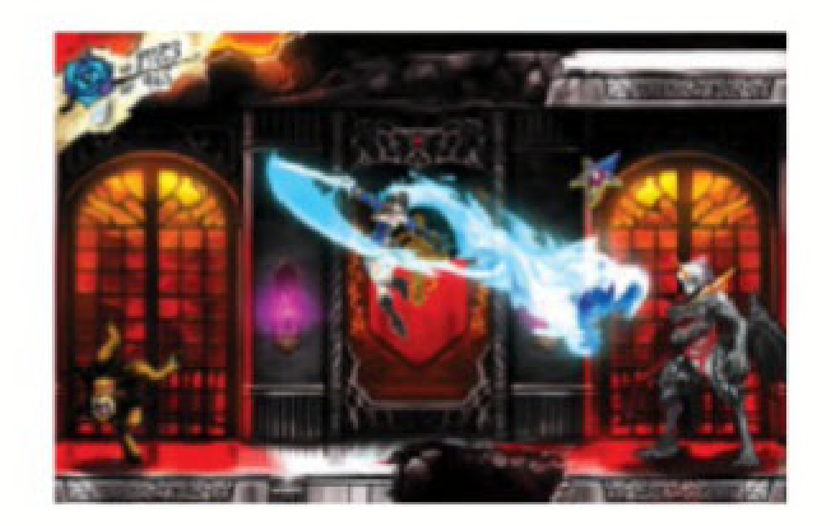
Format: PC, Mac
Publisher: Cherrymochi Game Studio
Developer: In-house
ETA: 2016 (Japan: 2015/US: 2016)



THERE'S BEEN a handful of truly interesting titles that have emerged from Square Enix's 'Collective Program', and *Tokyo Dark* has grabbed our attention. A 2D point-and-click adventure game boasting a beautiful anime art style, used to showcase a dark and vibrant view of the Tokyo skyline, and a deep, branching narrative as a detective spirals into a shadowy mystery. Already successfully Greenlit, get this on your radar.

BLOODSTAINED: RITUAL OF THE DARK

Format: Xbox One, PS4, PC
Publisher: Inti Creates
Developer: In-house
ETA: 2015



THIS IS the sort of insane dream project that Kickstarter was invented for. B*loodstained: Ritual Of The Dark* sees ex-Konami developer Koji Igarashi return to the genre he once pioneered, with a stirring spiritual successor to *Castlevania: Symphony Of The Night*. *Bloodstained* certainly looks the part, with its evocative Gothic art style, wicked creature design and sprawling dungeon design. No wonder it took just hours to fund.

YOOKA-LAYLEE

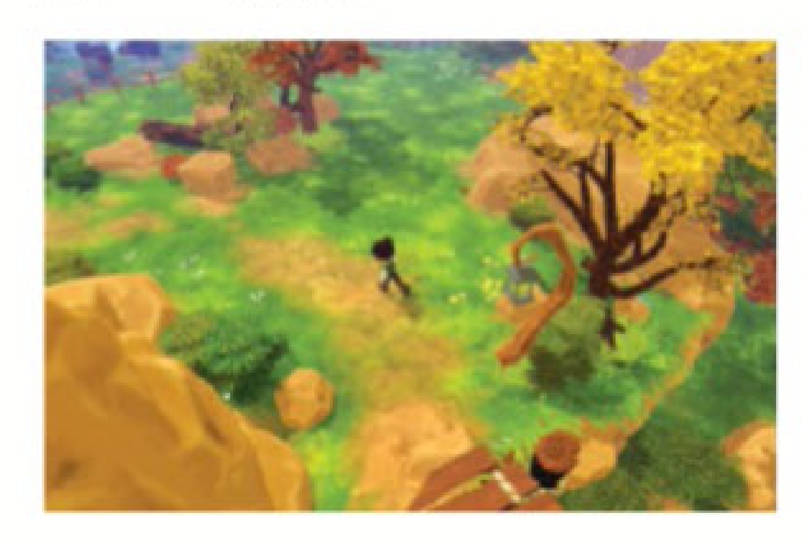
Format: PC, Mac, Xbox One, PS4, Wii U
Publisher: Playtonic Games
Developer: In-house
ETA: Q3 2016



THE FACT Microsoft decided to let the *Banjo-Kazooie* franchise sit dormant for the last seven years now seems a little crazy, don't you think? If ever there was proof of demand, it's with *Yooka-Laylee*, a spiritual sequel to the seminal N64 3D platformer. Developed by a staff comprised of ex-RARE and Banjo developers, *Yooka-Laylee* captured the hearts of a certain generation of gamers, becoming the fastest game in Kickstarter history to break a million.

DEADWOOD: THE FORGOTTEN CURSE

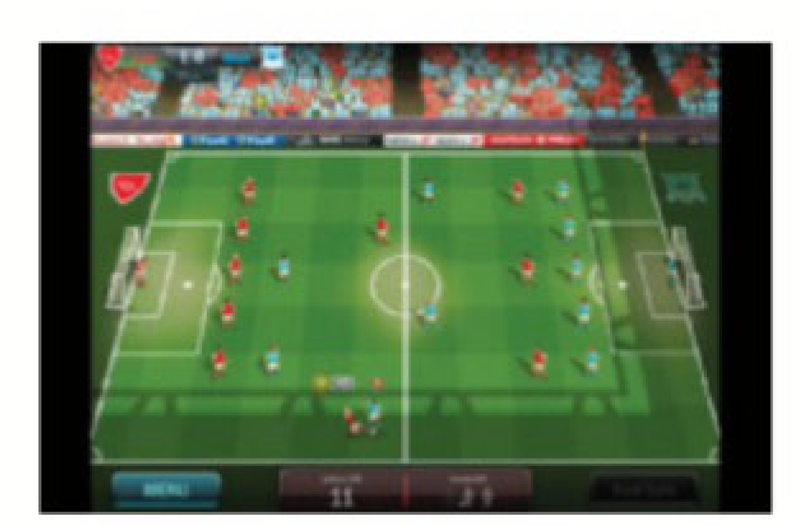
Format: PS4, Xbox One, PC
Publisher: Steamroller Studios
Developer: In-house
ETA: Q4 2015



SOMETIMES A playable demo makes a huge difference. It isn't that we weren't initially taken in by the fetching marionette-style character design or gorgeously painted world, but we may have balked at the claim *Deadwood: The Forgotten Curse* was '*Zelda* meets *Don't Starve*'. It's a bold claim that it's veering dangerously close to delivering on. Resource gathering, exploration and trying to survive the night, it's incredibly fun, so go try it out.

FOOTBALL TACTICS

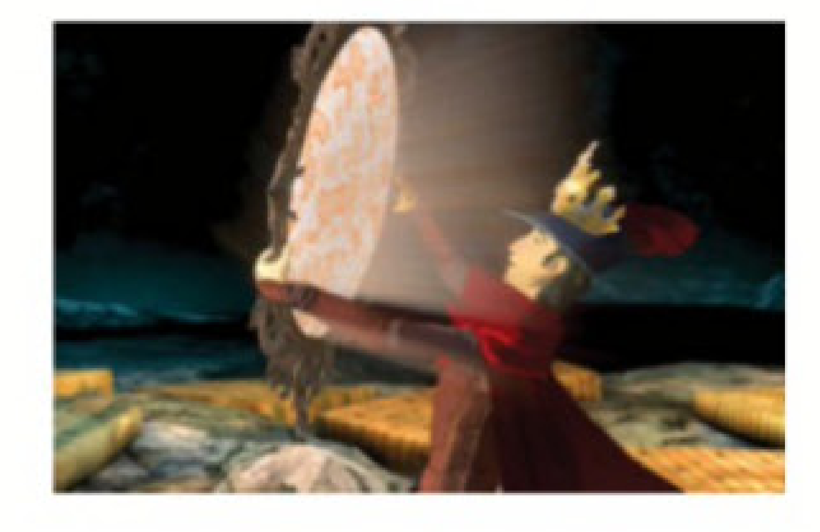
Format: PC
Publisher: Creoteam
Developer: In-house
ETA: 2015



DO YOU have fond memories of Subbuteo but don't have the space to set a game up in your house? Consider *Football Tactics*. This is a tactical football manager game that cuts the spreadsheets and numbers, distilling 90 minutes of action into turn-based matches. While it looks simple, it's a surprisingly fun and deep experience. Create a team, manage your players and take them to victory.

KING'S QUEST

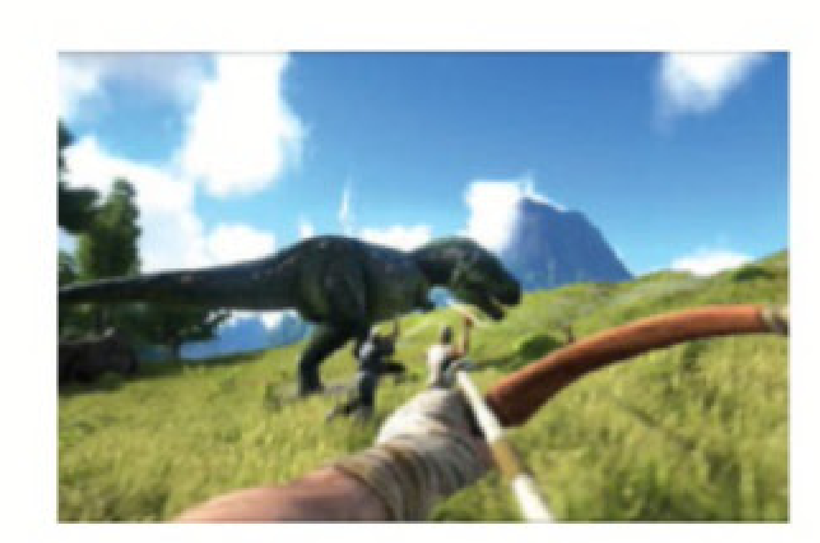
Format: Xbox One, PS4, PC, Xbox 360, PS3
Publisher: Activision
Developer: Sierra
ETA: 2015



SIERRA'S EPISODIC *King's Quest* revival looks to be a faithful return for the classic franchise, but it might be the voice cast that's getting us truly excited. *Back To The Future*'s Christopher Lloyd is joined by Josh Keaton – best known for his role as Peter Parker in *The Spectacular Spider-man* TV series – as the two main characters. *King's Quest* is coming together nicely, though we're still desperate to get our hands on it.

ARK: SURVIVAL EVOLVED

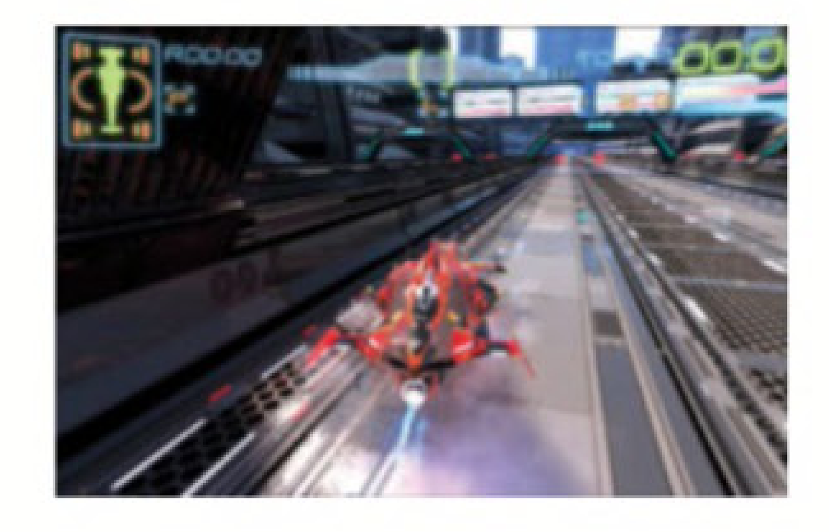
Format: PC, Xbox One, PS4
Publisher: Studio Wildcard
Developer: In-house
ETA: 2016



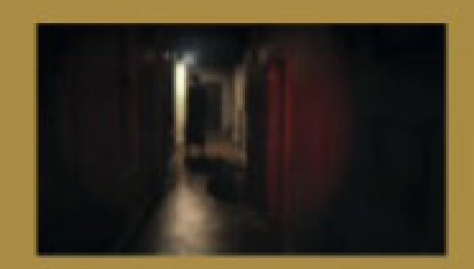
THERE'S A severe lack of good games offering prehistoric action, and that's a shame. The likes of *Turok* and *Dino Crisis* might have let you hunt dinosaurs, but have you ever wanted to saddle one up and ride them around a beautiful Unreal Engine 4-rendered open world? *Ark: Survival Evolved* is a game blending a deadly environment with even deadlier creatures and a punishing day/night cycle.

FORMULA FUSION

Format: PC
Publisher: R8
Developer: In-house
ETA: 2016

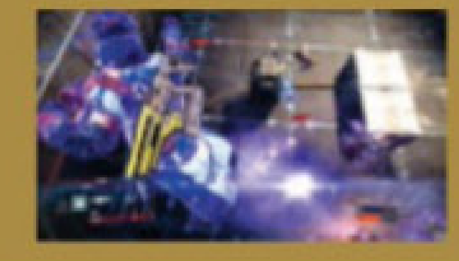


IT'S BEEN a good few years since Sony treated us to a new *WipEout* game, and so we're left to endlessly search through the depths of the 'net to find a suitable replacement. Still in its pre-Alpha stages of development, *Formula Fusion* looks like it has the potential to fill that gap. The Unreal Engine 4 is doing wonders, helping developer R8 re-create the aesthetic and feel of the futuristic racer for modern audiences.



CANCELLED – Silent Hills (PS4)

It's over. The dream of getting a Hideo Kojima-directed *Silent Hill* game is officially dead in the water. Konami pulled the plug on the full *P.T.* experience.



ANNOUNCED – Destiny: The Taken King (Multi)

Rumour has it, Destiny's major content drop this autumn is going to be a standalone expansion dubbed *The Taken King*. You saw it here first, folks.

FOR THE LOVE OF GOD

Format: **PC**
Publisher: **Itch**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **2015**



DID YOU sink an unhealthy amount of time into 2013's *Papers, Please* and are desperately searching for a new obsession? If so, it might be worth keeping a close eye on *For The Love Of God*. It uses the same core concept – judging people based on the information in front of you – only it takes it straight up to the pearly gates of heaven. Discover whether people have broken the ten commandments, and start condemning them to hell. Brutal.

BLACK MESA

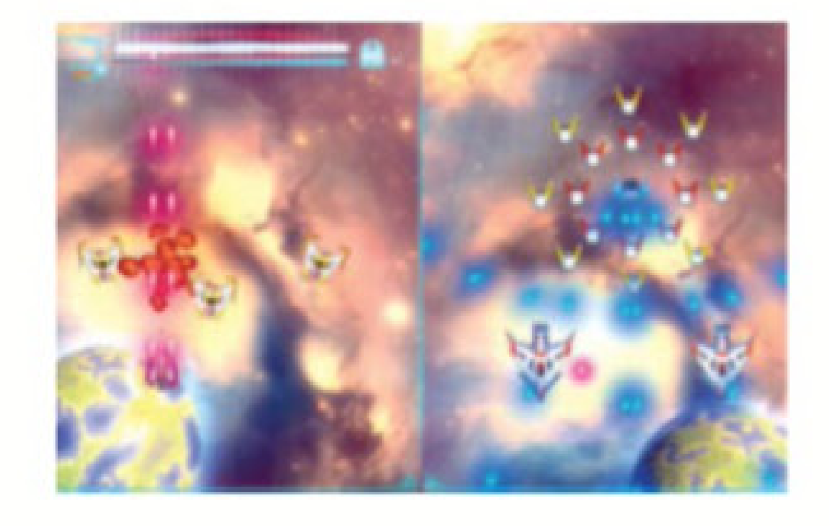
Format: **PC**
Publisher: **Crowbar Collective**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **Q3 2015**



BLACK MESA has proven to be as perfect of a *Half-Life* HD remake as we are ever likely to receive. An updated version hit Steam Early Access, revealing a more polished and refined experience than the one made available for free last year. The update is pretty great, offering what has to be one of the best fan remakes ever. *Black Mesa* makes *Half-Life* feel every bit as good as it did 17 years ago, and that's a true accomplishment.

DIMENSION DRIVE

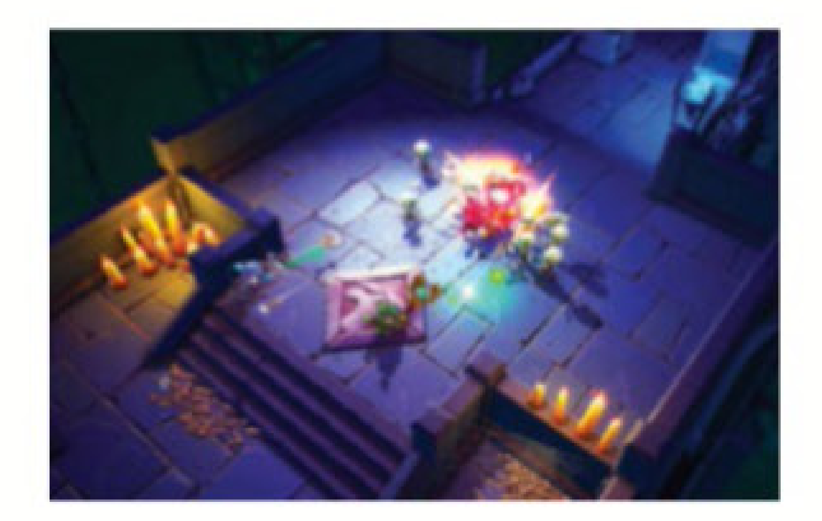
Format: **PC, Mac, Linux**
Publisher: **2Awesome Studio**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **2015**



HAVING SURVIVED what must be the first Kickstarter troll scare, *Dimension Drive* is a game that has more reason than most to be thankful to its community of backers who returned in force to get the game back up to its funding total. A $7,000 pledge got withdrawn at the last moment the first time the game looked to be funded, but now the dual-screen shooter that lets you teleport between two fields of battle at any time is back on track.

SUPER DUNGEON BROS.

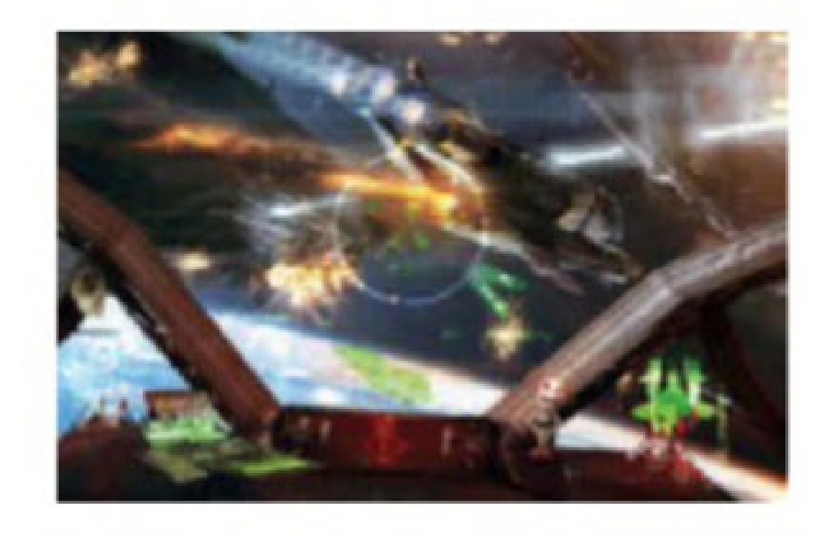
Format: **PC, Xbox One, PS4**
Publisher: **React Games**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **Q4 2015**



WE'VE BEEN watching *Super Dungeon Bros.* with cautious optimism; we've been waiting for another four-player co-op game to replace the likes of *Scott Pilgrim Vs. The World* for some time now. *Super Dungeon Bros.* is coming together nicely at Alpha stage, though it still feels a little slow. The base game is solid, however, and we're confident it will continue to improve as the studio moves towards its winter release.

STARFIGHTER INC.

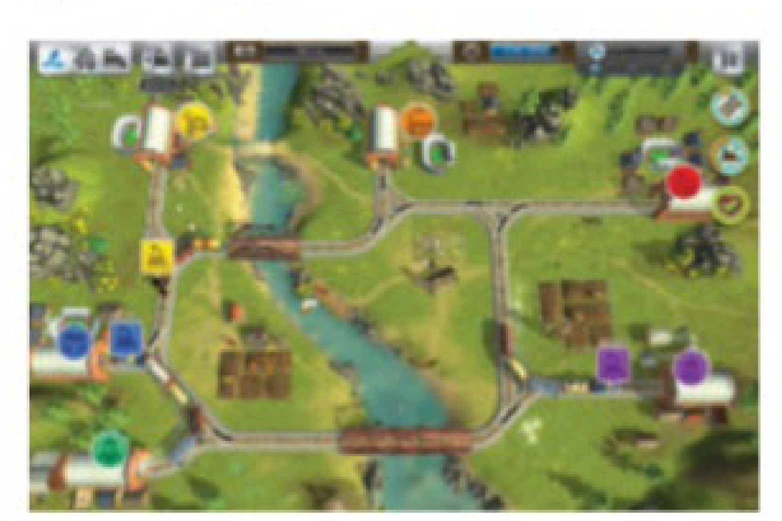
Format: **PC**
Publisher: **Impeller Studios**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **Q3 2016**



NOW *THIS* is something we can get behind. David Wessman, the creative mind behind the *X-Wing* series, is creating a brand-new space shooter along with a team of 15 industry veterans. Described as "*World Of Tanks* meets *Counter-Strike* in space" by the studio, Starfighter Inc. is a fast and fresh PvP multiplayer space game that has been built for the hardcore fans of *X-Wing vs. Tie-Fighter*.

TRAIN VALLEY

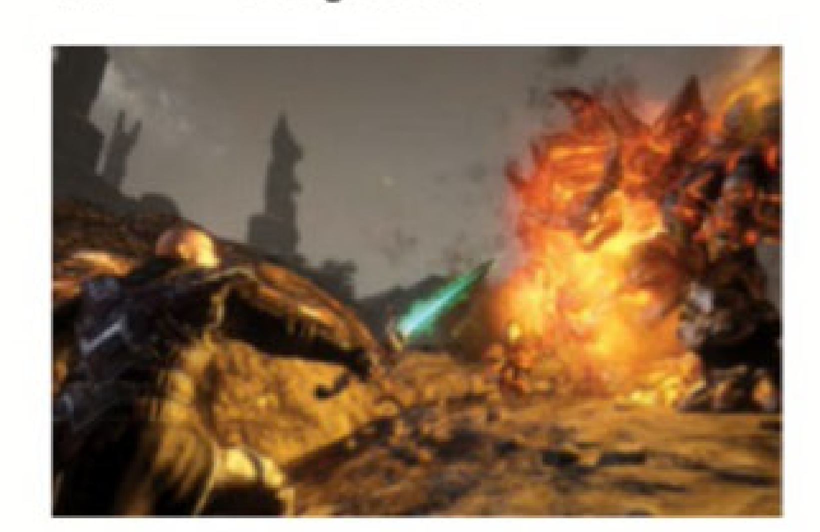
Format: **PC**
Publisher: **Yukitama**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **2015**



WHILE WE imagine driving real trains isn't full of excitement or intrigue, there's a strange addictive quality about train-management games. Unlike sims, such as *Cities In Motion*, however, *Train Valley* is all about simplicity. If you're sick of the state of British rail, this gives you the perfect opportunity to try your own hand at running the rails and showing South West Trains how it's done.

RISEN 3: TITAN LORDS – ENHANCED EDITION

Format: **PS4**
Publisher: **Deep Silver**
Developer: **Piranha Bytes**
ETA: **21 August 2015**



PIRANHA BYTES is bringing *Risen 3* to PS4, offering graphical fidelity on par with the ultra settings of the original PC release. That isn't all though: fans of the medieval-action RPG will be able to enjoy new high-resolution textures, improved depth of field and a solid 30fps frame rate. Sadly, there won't be any improvements to the core gameplay mechanics, which are in desperate need of a tune up.

SCREENCHEAT

Format: **Xbox One**
Publisher: **Samurai Punk**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **2015**



THE RISE of same-couch co-op has been delightful to see in the last year, and *Screencheat* is looking like a must-own party game for those times you want to invite your buddies round and screw them over. An FPS with a twist – you need to look at your opponent's quadrant of the screen to score because, well, everyone is invisible. It's silly, but fun, and it's a great addition to the ID@Xbox line-up.


games™
20 GAMES TO WATCH
BATMAN: ARKHAM KNIGHT KICKS OFF AN AMAZING SECOND HALF TO 2015, WHICH INCLUDES ASSASSIN'S CREED SYNDICATE, JUST CAUSE 3, HALO 5: GUARDIANS AND MORE



1

BATMAN: ARKHAM KNIGHT

Studio: Rocksteady **Directed by:** Sefton Hill

Supporting Cast: Kevin Conroy (Batman), Jonathan Banks (Commissioner Gordon), Ashley Green (Barbara Gordon), John Noble (Scarecrow), Scott Porter (Nightwing), Tara Strong (Harley Quinn), Troy Baker (Two-Face), Nolan North (Penguin), Grey Griffin (Catwoman)



THE HERO WE NEED

Can Batman: Arkham Knight break the run of Triple-A disappointments and deliver the kind of high-quality, bug-free experience fans demand? We get hands on with the final game build ahead of release and discuss those issues with Rocksteady

"DON'T TALK TO ME ABOUT GLITCHES AND PATCHES," EXCLAIMS ROCKSTEADY'S MARKETING GAME MANAGER GUY PERKINS. We might have been concerned that we'd hit a raw nerve, but thankfully he has a wide grin as we bring up the never-ending trend for day-one patches and glitchy Triple-A releases. Thankfully, Rocksteady has a reputation to uphold with the release of *Batman: Arkham Knight* and it has no intention of dropping this particular ball if it can help it.

"We're very conscious that historically we've released great software with a few bugs here and there," he continues. "I know that Sefton [Hill, studio co-founder and director] has never replayed *Asylum* or *City* once it launched because he would just spot everything he wanted to change or make different. I don't know if he'll be the same, but he'll probably be the same in this game. We're very conscious of making sure that the piece of software we launch on the 23 June will be as good as it possibly can be at that stage. Obviously there may be unforeseen elements that creep in, but our ambition is that when you put that disc in your console or when you've downloaded it you'll be getting the best experience that we can deliver."

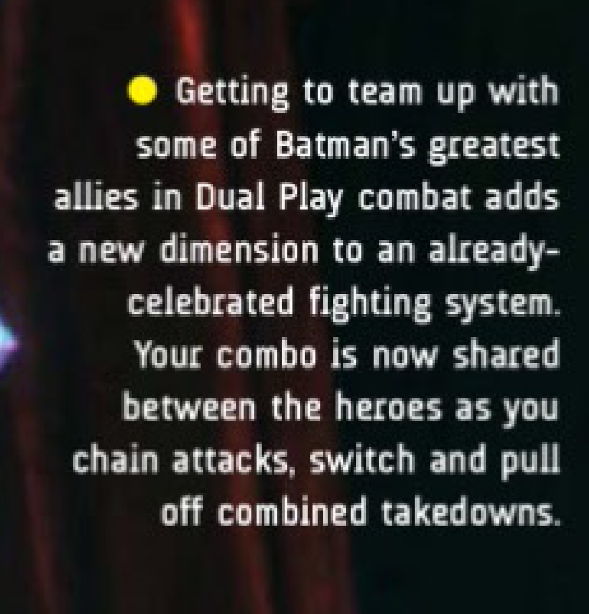
What's more, the game has already been delayed once precisely to avoid these issues and save *Arkham Knight* from joining the long list of spoiled launches we've seen so far this generation. "We wouldn't have been able to put in all the stuff that we wanted to do and we wouldn't have been able to release a piece of software that was as close to bug-free as possible," Perkins tells us. "I think there have been some high-profile cases of that and we are very conscious that we want to not let people down and that we're giving them something that they can play and encounter minimal issues with."

We've reached a sad time in the history of gaming when one of the most uplifting things we can hear from a developer is reassurance that it won't be releasing a broken game at launch. But Perkins is right; the history of Rocksteady would suggest this is a studio that puts final build quality high on its list of priorities. "The distinct impression that I get is that we've still maintained the same core pillars of what the studio was founded on," says Perkins, who joined Rocksteady just after the release of *Arkham City* as the studio ramped up for something bigger. "I think that at the end of the *Asylum* project there were around-about 40 people; we're now 160. We've expanded quite considerably over the almost ten years that we've been working on the *Batman* game. I think that at its heart Sefton Hill is very much focused on making the best videogame he and his design team can possibly do, irrespective of whether it's *Batman* or something else. That belief hasn't wavered in the period over the three games. We're still a hungry team. We still want people to play these games and appreciate them as a great *Batman* game, but also as a great game in general. We're still excited to work on *Batman* as a franchise. He's an awesome character and a privilege to work on. We never approach anything with complacency. We always know we're only as good as the last thing we've done, so this has to be the best thing we've done."

STANDING ON THE ROOFTOPS OF GOTHAM NOW, LOOKING OUT OVER THE DESTRUCTION AND CHAOS WROUGHT BY SCARECROW AND HIS ALLY, THE MYSTERIOUS ARKHAM KNIGHT, WE CAN SEE THE AMBITION OF THIS TEAM CLEARLY. It looks familiar, it plays almost identically, the streets still echo with the screams of victims and your comms still pick up the idle banter and bravado of the crooks that've taken over, but there's something clearer and crisper about this vision of collapsed society. Leaping and swooping across this bigger Gotham is made even more liberating than before, not only by the size of the map, but the increased width of roads designed with the Batmobile in mind and the lack of obvious constraints to you movement. We revisited *Arkham City* too, just to remind ourselves of how that game played and frankly, it was claustrophobic by comparison. This is a truly immense vision of Gotham in *Arkham Knight*, but keeping things familiar appears to have been an important cornerstone of this game's development.

"STICKING WITH WHAT WE KNOW, IT'S NOT A COPOUT."

"I think we rolled off the development of *Arkham City 2011* and pretty much straight into concepting and development for *Batman: Arkham Knight*," Perkins »



● Getting to team up with some of Batman's greatest allies in Dual Play combat adds a new dimension to an already-celebrated fighting system. Your combo is now shared between the heroes as you chain attacks, switch and pull off combined takedowns.



● Oswald Cobblepot seems to be as influential as ever. His business flourishes under the protection of Scarecrow and his mysterious champion.



Spoiler Alert

Do you really want to know who the Arkham Knight is? (possible major spoilers from Arkham City)

Much of the online debate around *Batman: Arkham Knight* has revolved around the identity of the titular villain. Who is the masked warrior working with Scarecrow who seems intent on humiliating Batman? For its part, Rocksteady appears to be enjoying the debate. "It's an interesting dichotomy," says Rocksteady's marketing game manager Guy Perkins. "The end of *Arkham City* was a massive surprise I think for a lot of people; killing The Joker is a huge deal. Keeping an eye on that though, no one talked about it. It's almost as if everyone knew it was the big news that you couldn't really talk about and they didn't want to spoil it and likewise for *Arkham Knight*. I think that character that people are desperate to unmask or get a little bit more information on; there are all these theories and explanations, but ultimately they don't want to know. It's funny.

"We sort of look at it and we're amused that there's so much speculation on this guy, but everyone's like 'I think this is my theory, but don't confirm it'."

We'll discover the truth soon, but here are some of our favourite theories from recent months…

THE JOKER

But he's dead, right? Well, in the comics no one is ever really dead (even Batman himself has been and gone a few times), so is it that laughable? Yes, probably it is. This doesn't seem like The Joker's style, but that doesn't mean he didn't have a role to play.

JASON TODD

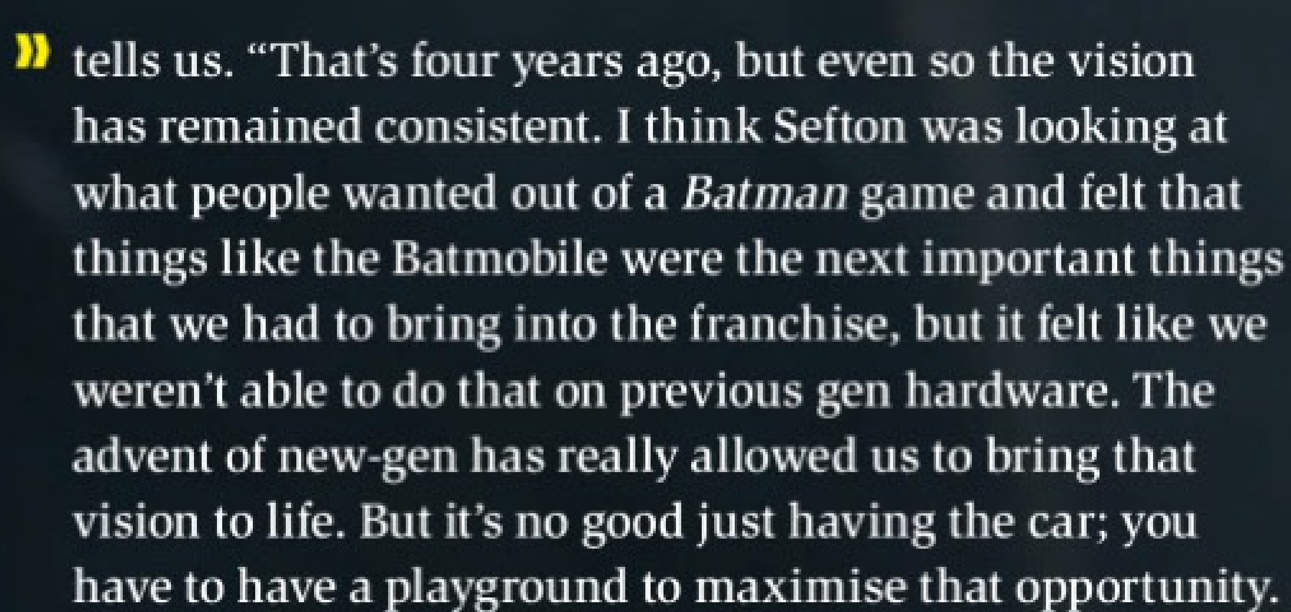
The middle Robin in the history of Batman's faithful sidekicks, in the comics Todd was killed by The Joker in *Death In The Family*, only to return as a homicidal vigilante years later taking on the old Joker moniker of the Red Hood. Could Todd's return be The Joker's last gag?

HUSH

Thomas Elliot made a brief appearance in *Arkham City* tormenting his old friend, ending with him getting facial reconstruction surgery to look like the billionaire. A character obsessed with getting into Wayne's head, he's a good fit.

JIM GORDON

Wait, hear us out. Given that Barbara Gordon is the Oracle and the Commissioner doesn't know, the seeds of discontent have been planted. Could the Joker have successfully broken Jim before he died, making him seek a new form of justice? Probably not, but it's a fun idea.



tells us. "That's four years ago, but even so the vision has remained consistent. I think Sefton was looking at what people wanted out of a *Batman* game and felt that things like the Batmobile were the next important things that we had to bring into the franchise, but it felt like we weren't able to do that on previous gen hardware. The advent of new-gen has really allowed us to bring that vision to life. But it's no good just having the car; you have to have a playground to maximise that opportunity.

"Once you start playing the game there are no loading screens. The game is seamless"

The entirety of Gotham City was the next hurdle to overcome. The story and the design of the game have always been there. Yes, we've had to change things along the way, but fundamentally where the narrative is going, the features we're bringing in, have been very consistent from day one."

Another key decision has been sticking with the Unreal Engine 3 for development. It's a move that may have raised eyebrows when compared to the brand-new tech being utilised elsewhere, but then again could it be that the race for 'new' that so many developers have joined is exactly why we're seeing so many games struggle? Rocksteady isn't making the mistake of trying to run before it can walk.

"Yeah, it's tech we know," admits Perkins. "It's a massively overhauled Unreal 3 Engine. There's not a lot in there that's standard. Our engine team are immensely talented and managed to squeeze a hell of a lot out of the engine and added a load of tech and features that still blow my mind when it comes to visuals and fluidity of gameplay. Sticking with what we know, it's not a copout. We've created this amazing world where every building is hand-crafted. There's not a single piece of procedurally generated content in the whole game. It's a massive challenge and making sure that it streams in at a solid frame rate and that the car feels fast and it handles nicely, but doesn't feel like it's two separate games, like a *Batman* game and a car game that work together. That stuff was a huge challenge, but that familiarity with that base tech has helped, and the transition to new gen presents great opportunities as well as technical challenges and we have to do what we can to overcome all that."

And so Rocksteady's ambition has been in crafting this world as solidly and with as much unique detail as possible. Graphically it's definitely an improvement on the previous titles, if perhaps not a generational leap forward. What is a leap forward though are those handcrafted buildings, the grimy streets of Gotham, the neon-lit skies and the wide expansive field ahead of you when you stand above it all, looking for crime to prevent or avenge. There's a pragmatism to Rocksteady's approach to this sequel that Batman himself would be proud of, sticking with the tech

● Batman appears to have been preparing for something big with a new suit and Batmobile, and that's exactly what the *Arkham Knight*'s mechanised army is presenting him.



it knows, working within its strongest skill sets to deliver something as precise as possible. *Batman: Arkham Knight* is looking to deliver results rather than necessarily being flashy for the sake of it.

ANOTHER IMPORTANT EXAMPLE OF THIS IS IN THE STUDIO'S USE OF CUT SCENES. Everyone at Rocksteady speaks glowingly of its in-house motion-capture studio, a resource that allows its team to quickly turn concepts into animations. The challenge Rocksteady faces, however, is one of self-restraint; to resist the urge to pack the game with cut scenes and remove our agency as players. "The way that we're handling cut scenes in game is that it's all done in-engine so we don't break to a pre-rendered cut scene," reveals Perkins. "We're not going for FMV or that kind of huge departure. Once you start playing the game there are no loading screens. The game is seamless and the cut scenes are integrated into that as part of that experience. And that's what we want to try and do is create that absorbing experience for gamers." And with the scale of the world being created, the vehicular gameplay, buildings to investigate and more, not having a single loading screen breaking this all up is an achievement to be applauded.

But that doesn't mean there aren't concerns. Pretty much from the moment the Batmobile was revealed, *Batman* purists have questioned the level of violence in the game. While the game has always walked the line of having Batman be brutal without being homicidal, the announcement that *Arkham Knight* was receiving an M rating in the US (the first in the series to do so) set some alarm bells ringing. Is this game really that much more violent or dark than before?

"It's not more violent; Batman doesn't do anything differently to how he has done previously," Perkins insists. "He cracks skulls and breaks bones, but he doesn't kill anyone. The introduction of the Batmobile, the destruction that [this] car dishes out is non-lethal to humans and lethal to the AI-controlled vehicles of the Arkham Knight. Batman's actions are no different to his previous outings. His core code of conduct remains untouched and remains faithful to the franchise and to the 75-year legacy. However, the themes of the story do go to some dark places. It's the end of the trilogy, he's at the peak of his powers, the story we're telling is very personal and we've made the game we wanted to make. We've never wavered from that. Yes, we've got a slightly older age rating this time out, but we felt that we didn't want to compromise on the vision of what that story was going to be. Fans were surprised by that, but it's not been harmful for us at all."

WE GOT A TASTE OF THE DARKER TONE AS WE PLAYED THE GAME TOO. Rocksteady has highlighted Batman's relationship with Commissioner Gordon, the fact that he still doesn't know that his daughter is working for the Dark Knight as Oracle and the fallout from the events at the end of *Arkham City* (we won't spoil them here, but there may be references elsewhere so watch out) as key touchstones for where this game picks up. As we swooped around Gotham and investigated the activities of Penguin, Riddler and Firefly, we found the caped crusader a slightly more taciturn figure than usual. The inner monologue that often punctures these games with his insights and detective acumen was slightly more stoic than we remember. It felt as if a burden were weighing on him, and although we had leaped into the game some way through for our final hands-on, we assumed it was a hangover from the last game. That Alfred was on the end of the line when Batman called in for some assistance in tracking Firefly rather than Oracle might also be a clue to more.

Of course, a key area of interest for us as we played this near-final version of the game was the Batmobile. It's such an iconic addition to the franchise, but potentially quite a game-breaking one. For Rocksteady it was simply a question of necessity to add this new piece of tech in order to push the game forward and continue the evolution of their vision for *Batman*.

"We wanted it to feel like a natural extension of you as Batman," explains Perkins. "It's kind of strange, when you first play the game you're maybe nervous; there's a bit of trepidation as to what's the experience that I'm going to be having, but once you get used to man and machine working together, it's awesome. There's nothing better than combining the two elements when you're in the city, so you're gliding around, you dive to the streets, you call in the car, straight in, you go off, you drive, you maybe chase down some thugs in their taxi, take them down, smash through a building, launch off a ramp, eject out of the Batmobile, hit terminal velocity, glide high above the rooftops… it just works. It's such a neat feature to have in there and it does make it feel like the complete *Batman* experience."

It did take a little getting used to, but with the scale of the city, having the Batmobile on beck and call was no small thing and didn't take away from the joyous option of taking to the sky instead. Rather it was another route to take and one that offers its own unique pleasures. For »

Quick-fire Questioning

60 seconds of Batman trivia with Guy Perkins



Who is the most requested *Batman* villain?
I think Mr Freeze is probably the one we get most asked about, so probably Freeze.

What do you consider to be the character you've warmed to the most?
I've always liked The Riddler, but I think in this outing Scarecrow is particularly gruesome. I think the Noble voice really nails it for us.

What's your favourite gadget?
Is the Batmobile a gadget? I suppose it is. So, [if that's the case] the Batmobile.

Favourite Easter egg?
Actually GCPD has got a lot of cool stuff in this game, so if you get a chance to explore that you'll see some cool stuff. Previously I think that iconic shot of The Joker being carried out in that pose and if you play the game again, at the very beginning of the game there's that painting. If you've forgotten and you go back it's a nice little link that ties it all up.

What's been your favourite *Batman* graphic novel?
I really like *Hush*. Jim Lee for me draws Batman like no one else and so I think he's my favourite. There's a few other comics, but I think that's probably my favourite.

Favourite Batmobile from other media?
I've got a soft spot for the Tumbler, because it's got that really aggressive wedge-like shape, but then the *Animated Series* Batmobile as well. It's the elegance of that fantastic, elongated shape.

Does Batman die?
It's the epic conclusion to the Rocksteady Batman trilogy, so you'll have to wait and see 23 June.



SUITING UP

INSIDE THE REDESIGN OF THE DARK KNIGHT'S ARMOUR

» a start, Gotham is far more destructible than you might imagine when driving around in the Batmobile. As we acquainted ourselves with the handling of this Tumbler-like beast of an automobile we swerved and crashed into just about everything around. Trees, lampposts and even concrete flowerbeds posed no problem for us. They turned to dust under the wheels of our ride. In one sequence, chasing Firefly through the streets of Gotham before ejecting for a mid-air takedown, we really got to see that while the streets are wider, there's still a nice level of challenge to racing around at full speed.

WE THEN ATTACKED ONE OF THE NEW BATMOBILE-FOCUSED RIDDLER CHALLENGES SET IN THE FAMILIAR SEWERS OF GOTHAM. It would appear the Riddler has taken an interest in the construction and arsenal of this new vehicle so he wants to put it through its paces. Racing around the sewer, we're asked to trigger barriers and ramps to appear, switching between red and white objects to keep the track ahead of us clear. Meanwhile, we're also trying to keep our afterburner running so we're going fast enough to leap across gaps and ride up walls when we need to.

As we switch between hitting Triangle (or Y on Xbox) for afterburner and Circle (B on Xbox) for the environment manipulation it starts to feel similar to a combat scenario. Sure, we're racing, holding down the trigger to accelerate, but this face button work is not unlike taking on a room full of thugs



The Riddler's Batmobile challenges are some of the most fun things you can do in your new automobile. They're a stiff obstacle, as all his little games are, but a great testing ground for the new tech.

holding different weapons. It's a test of sense memory and reaction speed, dodging, countering and evading at the right times. In this respect the Batmobile does feel like a logical extension of the *Arkham* series.

Speaking of Batman's combat system, we can't help but comment on what a massive draw it has been for this series. We've heard *Assassin's Creed* developers talk about how impactful they found it on their similar combat style, seen *Shadows Of Mordor* borrow from it and now another Warner game, *Mad Max*, appears to be leaning towards it too. We wondered if Rocksteady had taken the chance to compare notes with these other Warner titles. Perkins tells us that while most of the studio played and enjoyed *Mordor* and a few have played some of *Max*, *Batman*'s unique challenges mean they need to forge their own path. "The interesting thing for us with Batman is that his core principles of not killing present a challenge for the combat," he explains. "How do you keep combat visceral, impactful and interesting, but at the end of the day no one is dying? That in itself differentiates is from other games.

"*Mordor* is fantastic; the violence in that game was pretty full-on, using two swords to chop heads off and that's great. Unfortunately – or fortunately – we have to be creative in other ways. Like I said, Batman can't kill; he has to think of more creative ways to get his foes into submission. Breaking bones and cracking skulls is fine, so long as they don't die."

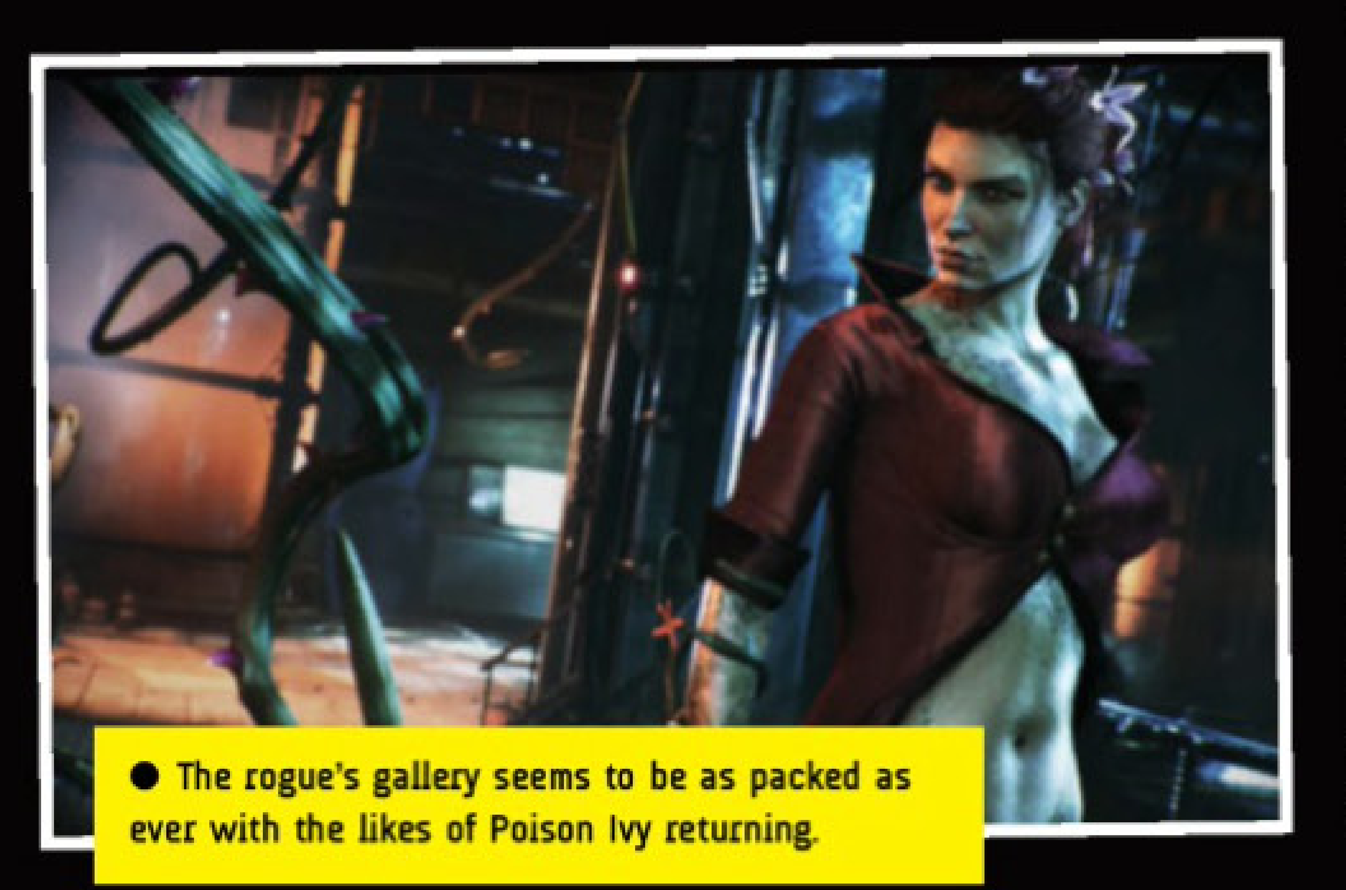
One of those creative solutions has been the addition of what the team has called Dual Play combat, adding a second hero character to the fray and allowing you to switch between Batman and this other combatant. Perkins wanted to clarify any misunderstanding about this feature he had seen online. "We're making a *Batman* game, so we're not doing that *GTA* multiple character select sort of solution, which some people have said 'is it like that?' and it's not," he tells us. "The reason is, it's a *Batman* game, it's not a Batman, Nightwing, Robin and Catwoman game. They're in there and they serve a purpose and they help with the stories, but the ability to switch between the two is a nice feature. By adding that you then get multiple layers of complexity. You have your individual combat combo, which you can share between either character, so you can switch between and your combo will carry over to each character, so you can work out moves between the two. You've then got a dual play combo meter as well so if that's charged you can do the dual takedown manoeuvres and if you're clever you can then assess the threats in the room and use that to takedown the bigger threats rather than wasting it on lower-grade thugs. Then it's just a great chance to show off different animations, different combat styles and make players feels like, 'yes this is a *Batman* story, but I'm doing this with my friends too'."

> "IT'S A BATMAN GAME, IT'S NOT A BATMAN, NIGHTWING, ROBIN AND CATWOMAN GAME"

WE FOUND THE SYSTEM TO BE QUICK AND SEAMLESS, ALLOWING FOR SOME PRETTY AMAZING NEW TAKEDOWN MOVES. In our play through it was Nightwing who joined the fight against some Penguin thugs and his faster, more acrobatic style was a nice respite from the thudding, crunching, brutal combat of Batman. It ultimately means that rooms can be even more packed out with villains as two heroes take them out in combination. Importantly, the AI comrade can be hit, but cannot be taken down in these fights, neither can it win on its own. It's there to leap into when you want and to keep things moving, but it will not fail or win the battle for you.

We also got to try out a fear takedown, dropping into a small bout and targeting each enemy in the room one by one in slo-mo, chaining the single-blow knockouts. It's one of those new features that empowers us and lets us embody Batman, a bit like the first time we got to punch through a wall a grab a thug on the other side. Mixing Batman's athletic ability and strength with his penchant for intimidation is what makes him unique and Rocksteady has done a great job of capturing this. In what is currently being discussed as the studio's final outing with this franchise, we have to wonder how the development team feels about ending a ten-year association with the character. "I think a lot of the team are approaching the game with mixed emotions," admits Perkins. "It's amazing that we've been able to tell a story over three episodes, three chapters and we feel immensely privileged to have worked with such an iconic character in such an iconic universe. But also it's quite sad that it's coming to an end. Granted, there will be stuff that we'll be doing after launch with the game, but this is the end of an era as it were for us and for *Batman*."

And what comes next for this London studio? "It will be interesting in the next few months to see the reception to it and gauging the reaction of the fans," Perkins tells us. "Then obviously there's the DLC side of things and then after that, who knows? I don't know what our next project is. Even though it's the end of *Batman* for us, it's still *Batman* 24/7 at the moment and for the foreseeable future it will still be *Batman*. When we get to our next project, whatever that might be, I think the drive of the studio will still be to deliver best in class videogame experiences, whatever the IP is that we're working on."



The rogue's gallery seems to be as packed as ever with the likes of Poison Ivy returning.

CONTENT CONTROVERSY

WHAT DOES $40 OF EXTRA CONTENT REALLY GET YOU?

The announcement of DLC plans these days is almost always going to cause a stink, unless you follow *The Witcher*'s path and give away a swathe of content for free, of course. Rocksteady announced its season pass would cost almost as much as the game itself and many questioned whether it would really be worth the money. We asked Rocksteady's Guy Perkins what we should expect for our money. "So, we've announced the season pass and we've got some pretty ambitious ideas around what we want to put into it," he tells us. "We are currently finishing the game, literally days away and probably by the time this goes out we'll be done. We've confirmed that Batgirl will be the first piece of playable content and there's lots more to come." So, not too much extra detail, but the promise of "ambitious ideas" seems hopeful.



2

JUST CAUSE 3

Studio: Avalanche Studios
Director: Roland Lesterlin
Influences: James Bond, Michael Bay, *El Mariachi*



THE MOST EXPLOSIVE GAME EVER MADE

AVALANCHE STUDIOS IS GOING BIGGER, LOUDER AND MORE DESTRUCTIVE WITH JUST CAUSE 3…

The explosions are big, the options are overwhelming, and the pace is often frightening, but it's the setting and scenery that consumes you upon first dipping your toes into *Just Cause 3*'s waters. For whatever reason, the Mediterranean has been largely ignored by the world of videogames; skyscraper skylines, dusty plains and post-apocalyptic cities taking centre stage in its absence.

Sure, *Assassin's Creed* has depicted Italy and *Total War* has often provided a wider panorama of the region, but there's been barely a blip when it comes to intimately portraying island chains set in the midst of Europe's major sea. Avalanche Studios is here to change that, intent on showing that the area can provide as much in terms of aesthetic beauty as it does in the potential for brash, Eighties action movie-style destruction. Juxtaposition, in games as anywhere else, tends to go down well. »

● Being able to stick to stuff, upside down, does have its uses. Not least when it comes to handling heavy weaponry.

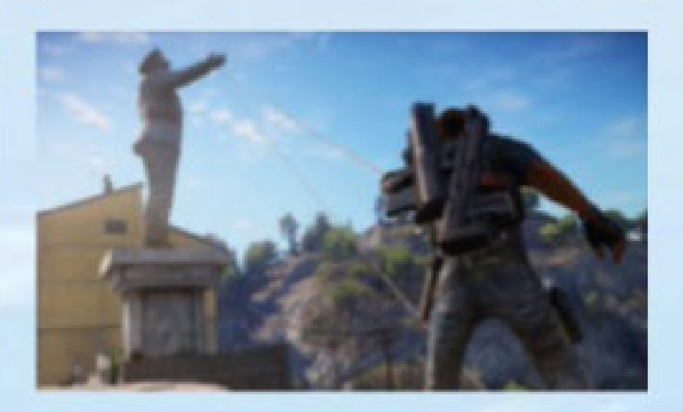
Just Cause 3's fictional Medici setting is based more on the stretches of land and open water that link the Cote D'Azur with the tip of Sicily than it is on any individual population centre or city. Its island chains throw up mountains, beaches, forests both dense and sparse and all manner of villages, towns, military bases and industrial centres. The current buzzword is to label this sort of environment a 'playground', a sandbox in which you're free to test your creativity by deploying the various talents and tools available to Rico, our series protagonist.

And it *is* a playground, but it's immediately obvious that there's a layer of complexity here that is absent from the majority of its genre peers. This is first observed through the nature of Medici's mountains, the various craggy peaks and valleys adorning the many islands. There's barely a hint of genuinely flat land as subtle inclines turn into dramatic cliff faces, giving the entire region a sense of being formed over millennia by tectonic forces – rather than by a modern terrain-modelling algorithm.

Standing atop a rocky outcrop and looking over the horizon, across bays and sunsets, winding roads and previously-decimated enemy checkpoints, gives you that unique sense of wanting to blow it all up because it's just too beautiful. That's Medici's real quality: it makes you want to wade in and start pulling down what the design team has so painstakingly erected. A big part of that rather unnerving attraction stems from the diversity on offer, meaning there are plenty of new structures that we need to learn how to demolish.

"We felt the Mediterranean offered something unique that hasn't really been explored in other games. It's an area that seems to have been largely forgotten, which is a shame," explains a contemplative Anders Bodbacka, senior technical designer. "We try to put something new and different in each part of the world. Every part of it is unique… really, no two areas are alike. It's a very beautiful place to explore, whether you're gliding through mountain and cave formations, looking over beaches or travelling through populated areas. That could be in a vehicle, on foot, by parachute or using the wing suit."





● Guns are nice, but tethers are the core of Rico's armoury. With them you can bring down all manner of structures, scale those structures and/or use them as weapons. It's here that your creativity comes into play.

The wing suit is a completely new addition to the series; its inclusion presumably inspired by the relatively recent fame and popularity of the daredevils seen on YouTube gliding dangerously close to trees and rocks with fabric skin outstretched. If you've yet to be exposed to the extreme sport in question, imagine a human edition of a flying squirrel and you're pretty much there.

Of all the vehicles included here, it's the wing suit that offers perhaps the greatest freedom in both reaching those awkward spots and taking in the scenery as you go. Now, instead of parachuting off that mountain or spire, you can glide from it, jetting yourself through tunnels, between cracks in the rock and directly into the heart of the enemy at a speed that makes it difficult for them to track you. But getting to grips with the physics of the thing is not easy. It comes bundled with a very specific weight and turning circle that doesn't initially feel natural, but after half an hour or so of practice the rules of flight begin to click and the possibilities unlock themselves.

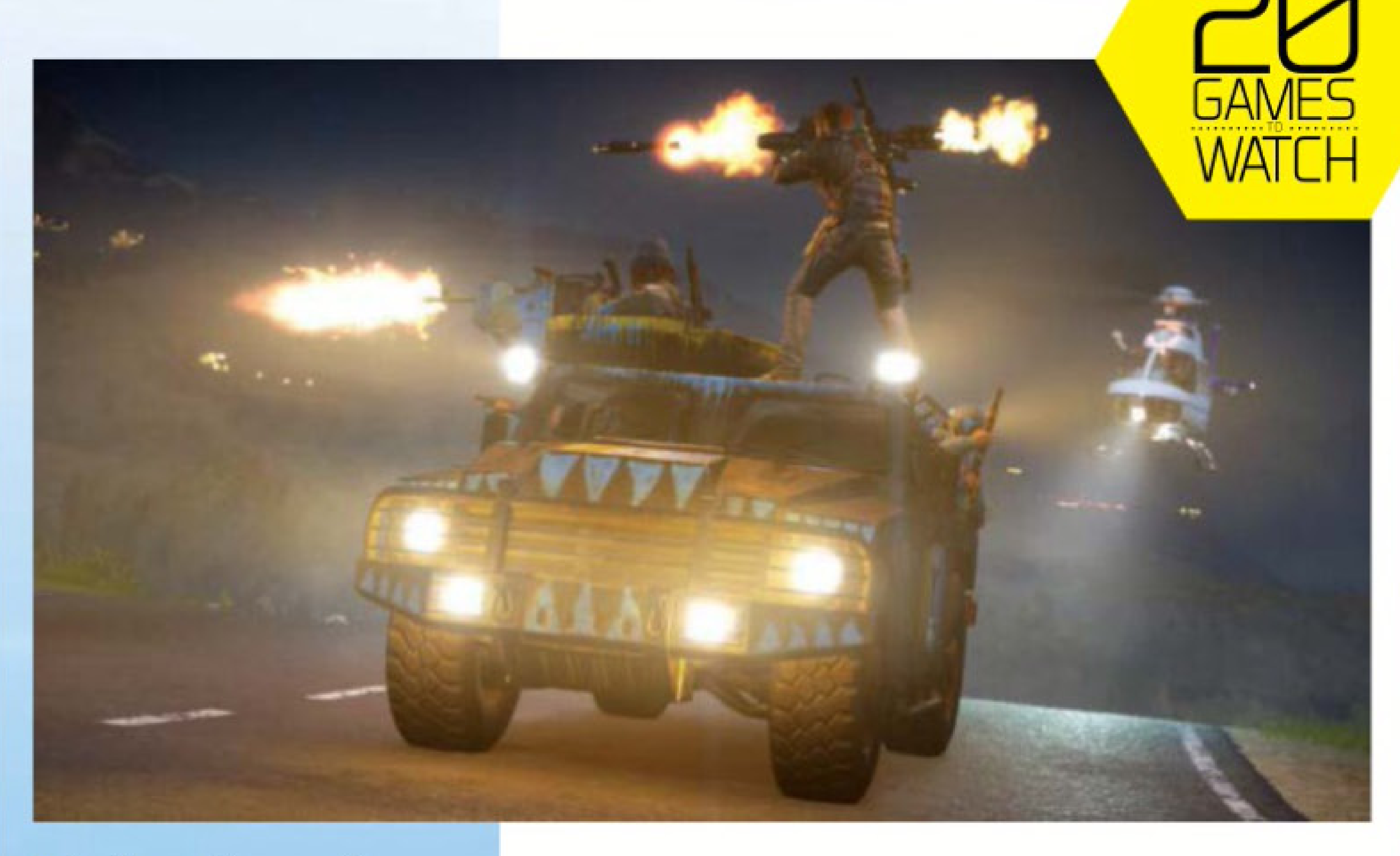


"OF ALL THE VEHICLES INCLUDED HERE, IT'S THE WING SUIT THAT OFFERS PERHAPS THE GREATEST FREEDOM"

Once you get better at understanding the intricacies of the suit you can start combining it with Rico's trademark tethers; the ropes act as grappling hooks capable of propelling you forward at speed. Mastering this trick can secure that extra bit of lift required to avoid death and make it safely to the next platform or across the next valley. Combine the burst of speed with the opening of your parachute and you can fire yourself dramatically into the sky, opening up even more ambitious journeys. It might be the same wing suit you can see on YouTube, but the ability to couple it with Rico's other toys elevates it into a realm of near-fantasy.

"If we approach a game like this by trying to make it too realistic, then it won't be as fun," says Bodbacka when asked on whether or not 'realism' is a word that's used much within the studio. "We always want to go over the top where possible; that's the way *Just Cause* is and it's the way we want to keep it. Everything is cranked up to 11… and then a little bit beyond that. The challenge for us is how we explore that pushing of the boundaries, but also somehow ground it in some semblance of reality so that what you're doing and who you're playing as feels believable."

That vague semblance of reality comes primarily from the implementation of each separate element, but the 'cranking it up to 11' comes from the combination of those in unison. It seems to be a full and engaging system on offer here; it's not only the wing suit, grappling hook and parachute that can be merged to deliver implausible results, it's also the very systems governing how Medici operates, with or without your input. Providing objects and installations to blow up, for instance, is something so common in this medium that it hardly warrants any attention. If you're given a gun, as you are in most popular games, then you're also going to be given something to blow up. That might be brains, that might be cars, it might be bright red barrels. The challenge nowadays, then, comes in providing explosions and destruction worth talking about.



One Humvee, four men with guns… being chased by a helicopter. Makes a James Bond movie look like the Teletubbies.



There's a surprising wealth of different scenery to explore, despite the fact that the entire game is set within the Mediterranean region. Mountains, forests, towns, ports, prisons and more are there to enjoy and/or destroy.



Just Cause 3 tackles this problem by linking its explosions/destructions to other systems, expanding the options open to you and delivering something far less predictable in the process. Rico's tethers, for example, can create a wire bridge between two points that can be manipulated by increasing or decreasing the tension. Lock one side of a tether to an oil tanker and the other side to a power generator, increase the tension, then stand back and enjoy the fireworks. Or you might be more interested in slamming two enemies into one another at great speed, or attaching an enemy to the aforementioned generator before bringing in the oil tanker. The more sadistic among you might even decide that dragging your recent kills behind your truck by tethering them to the bumper is more fitting. There's scope for a lot of creativity in the carnage.

"A lot of the entertainment comes down to how you stage the potential to cause destruction and how you utilise the physics that governs it," says Bodbacka, on the subject of making explosions actually fun again. "Adding physics that do these sorts of things in a new way is important. Many games provide one kind of destruction, but often it's scripted. If it's not scripted, it's often just a standard 'Shoot it and it goes boom' kind of thing. We want to really push it to the next level by making it physically alive. Interacting with an object that can explode is about more than just giving players something to shoot and having them watch it blow up, it's about providing interactions and results from those explosions.

"Shooting and exploding one thing might trigger something else to happen, or you might use your tethers to alter things as they're blowing up. It's that chain reaction, that potential to create a cascade of explosions, that separates us quite a lot from other games. Explosions and destruction are, for us, like a whole toy in itself that's present in the game alongside, and in unison, with everything else that's possible."

In terms of development, then, nothing can be performed in isolation. The reliance on interacting and reactionary game systems requires Avalanche to work as a whole at all times, with a single change in one area potentially trickling down to alter another elsewhere. Bodbacka might direct much of the technical qualities – explosions, physical destruction, physics-based movement – but without an intimate understanding of everything else he can not only not do his job, but it becomes difficult to know what his »

Cranking It Up To 11

How much crazy is acceptable?

The *Just Cause* series relies on taking its brand of open-world mayhem and destructive possibilities one step further than the rest. But are there ever occasions in which the team comes up with something that is simply too much?

Senior technical designer Anders Bodbacka weighs in: "There have been instances where we've had to dial it back a little, but they have been very rare. Oftentimes you make something that you personally think is too much, but then you show it to other people on the team and they tell you that you should push it even further and go bigger with it.

"It's really about keeping things believable within the *Just Cause* universe. We're not going to go into sci-fi territory here, and when we do sometimes tread that ground with our ideas we have to look at that and scale it back. Other than that, though, it's pretty much full steam ahead with us trying to do the maximum we can.

"I think the *Just Cause* series has always stood out as something unique compared to other open-world games. It's more of a light-hearted game. It relies a lot on humour and funny characters and it's meant to allow you to be able to jump in at any time, have some fun by creatively blowing things up and then maybe battle a friend in a challenge or do whatever else you like. That variety and that refusal to take itself so seriously is key."

» job is: "There's a constant balancing act going on to get everything right and in sync in a game like this and you can only do that by working closely with everyone else," he explains. "It's especially important to make sure the explosions and destruction work properly alongside the vehicle and player mechanics, that's essential.

"The way Rico moves and acts is the player's only interface into this detailed world we've built, so that has to allow them to properly react to it and interact with it. There's a constant communication and sharing of ideas between myself and the rest of the team. Without that there would be no way of knowing whether what one of us is changing is ruining what someone else has done."

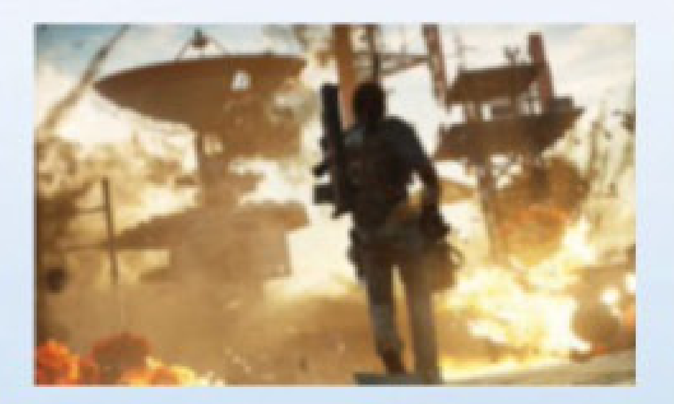
Such a balancing act also applies to the structure of progression, narrative and the freedom to do as you please. Amid the complex possibilities offered by the physics systems and Rico's abilities are missions of the 'main' and 'optional' variety, alongside ad-hoc challenges designed to test your skills in key *Just Cause* areas.

The primary narrative is underpinned by Rico's desire to bring a dictatorship ruining life on Medici to its knees. After being born in Mexico, Rico grew up on the island chain with his mother, eventually forced to flee the country when General Di Ravello and his army forcibly took control. Older, stronger, smarter, our hero is now in a position to overhaul tyranny. It seems very B-movie action, but as long as *Just Cause 3* remains self-aware, we're willing to go along with it for the moment.

That said, we've yet to partake in one of these core missions, Avalanche performing the standard pre-release trick of staying tight-lipped about the precise nature of the intimate story beats. Instead, our time has been spent on side missions tasking us with flying through hops in the wing suit, staying above a certain speed in a bus, and causing as much property damage to enemy outposts as possible within a time limit. It's all fairly standard fare, but the way in which it's presented means it avoids that feeling that you're grinding through a huge list of missions, ticking them off as you go. Unlike the hideous maps and menus that adorn far too many Ubisoft titles, *Just Cause 3* takes a more subtle approach to the provision of such distractions, only highlighting their presence when you're within close distance to them.

You might, then, be happily walking/running/flying/gliding from one place to the next, only to by chance stumble upon the aforementioned bus. From here you can choose to engage in its associated mission or not. It might sound like a small and insignificant change, but it pulls off a deeper engagement with the world in a way that gives you that slight buzz of discovery that makes you want to explore each part of Medici in order to uncover exactly this sort of challenge. The most interesting of these challenges we've so far come across are those designed to test your destructive skills, unsurprising given the focus on getting the physics for such interactions perfect. Far from simply blowing up generic buildings, the goal here is frequently to dismantle radar towers, bunkers, satellite dishes and all manner of other structures while fending off Ravello's army.



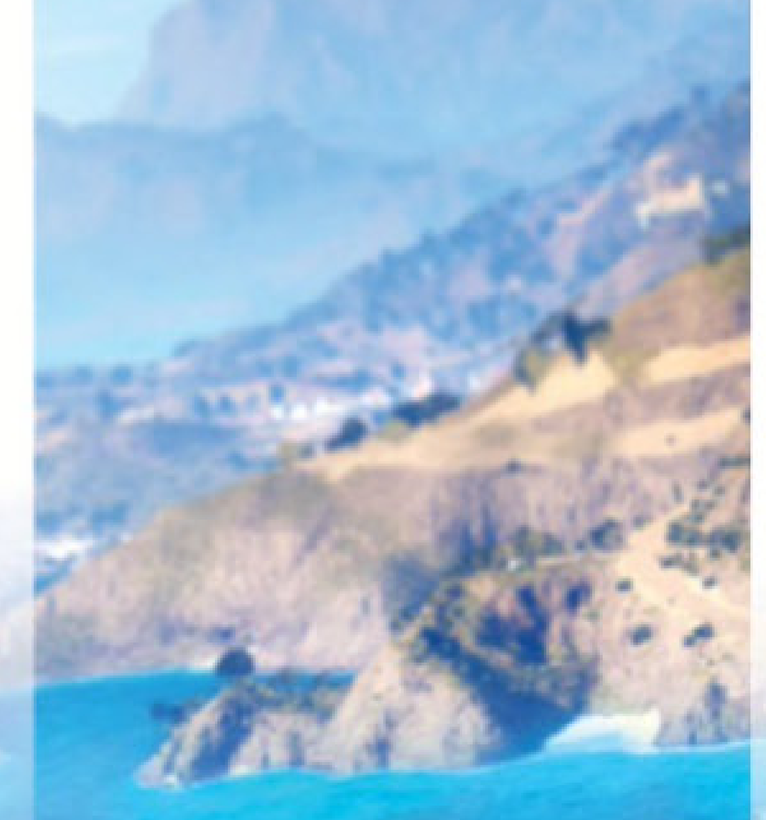


This is what a few bricks of C4, intelligently-placed tethers and a minigun is capable of achieving. Don't try this at home.

"UNLIKE THE MAPS AND MENUS OF FAR TOO MANY UBISOFT TITLES, JUST CAUSE 3 TAKES A MORE SUBTLE APPROACH..."



The nature of the physics system means the outcome of your onslaughts are often difficult to predict. Trial and error is a good approach.



Entering from up high via the wing suit allows you to take position atop the highest of towers, giving you not only a vantage point from which to plan your attack but also the perfect opportunity to tether the tall thin structures together. Once tethered, simply launch yourself off and increase tether tension to watch the monoliths collide into each other and kill whoever is unlucky enough to get caught underneath them.

If the tethers don't do the job then your unlimited supply of C4 will provide any required extra kick. All of this is likely to court the attention of the helicopters and tanks, which are perfect for hijacking and flattening the base even further. Gliding in the wing suit towards a hovering chopper, before grappling yourself into it and busting open the door is exactly the kind of exaggerated pomp that *Just Cause 3* is built upon and, at least for the hours we've played, fails to get old.

However, only time will tell to what extent the formula holds its appeal. Without being able to interact with the narrative there's very little sense of how things are going to be paced in a way that prevents you becoming numb to the excitement. Explosions, wing suits and Spider-Man-esque grappling hooks are all well and good, but their sensational nature raises the potential for things to become over-saturated with action to the point that the extreme starts to feel normal.

In the right hands, a film can get away with nonstop action given that it requires little comparative interaction on your part and its running time is typically limited to a couple of hours. Action games must be much more careful about how they pace themselves, particularly open-world games in which the player is – in theory – free to tackle things in line with their own whims and desires. Asking the player to police the pacing of content themselves is all well and good, but there must exist content of a type that provides calmer moments of reflection. All we've seen thus far is action and, without a doubt, that action is of the highest orders of creativity and technical execution. The test will come from what's available to do when you've had your day's fill of playing the action hero.





Bike

Sporting stunning acceleration and unparalleled nimbleness, motorbikes are the vehicle of choice for those that prefer to outmanoeuvre, rather than outrun, their aggressors. They come in various shapes and sizes, of course, so some research and practice is necessary to understand exactly which one best fits your wants and needs.

You can go your own way

Cars are just one form of transport...



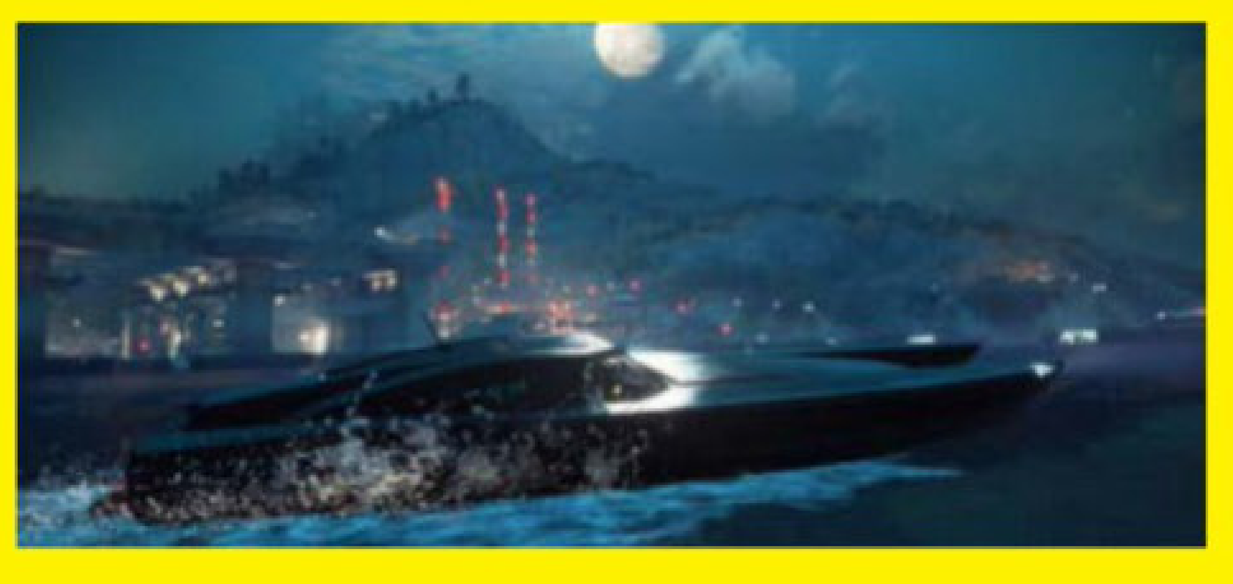
Helicopter

Many flying machines are on offer to pilot, but it's the smaller choppers that have proven themselves most diverse and useful thus far. Their ability to hover makes them perfect for precision strikes against targets that would be dangerous on the ground. Plus, they're also the most fun of the vehicles to hijack.



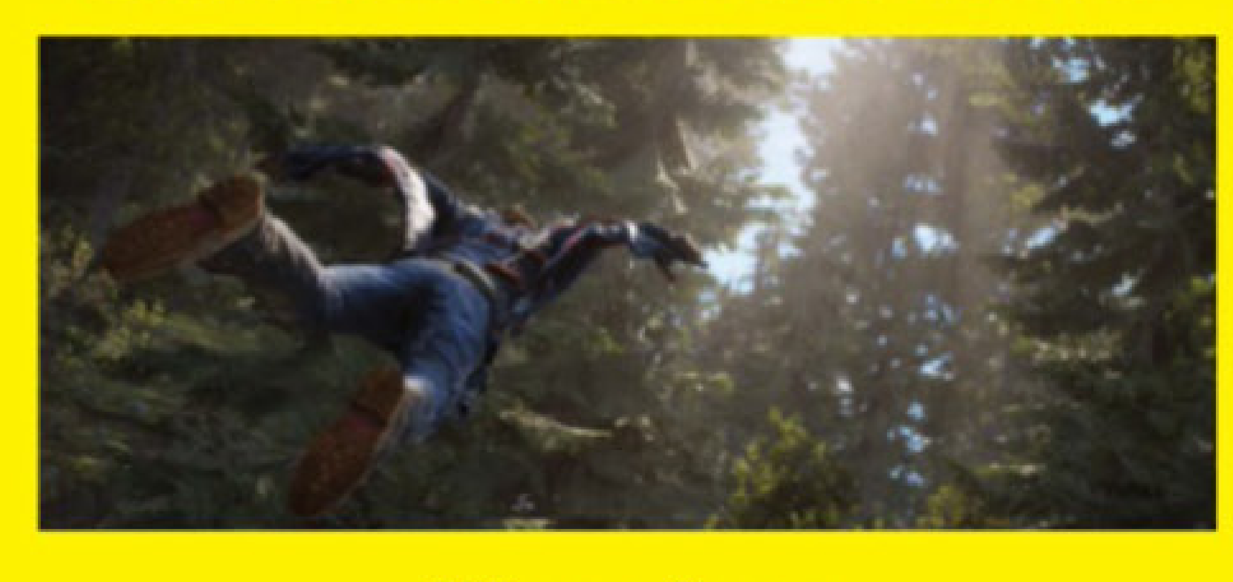
Tractor

More novelty, the tractor's lack of cover and speed leaves you phenomenally susceptible to attack. Its raw strength does have its uses, however, especially if you can get close to a base without being noticed. Stick some C4 to it, bail out at the last second and watch things explode.



Boat

Medici is an island chain, therefore boats are incredibly useful for getting from one landmass to the next. The heavier, faster boats are able to speed through the waves with little effort, while the lighter variety can often struggle to maintain momentum in the face of choppy waters. Don't get caught by Ravello's navy when sailing the latter...



Wing Suit

The jewel in Rico's armoury, the wing suit allows for swift navigation of areas that you would otherwise have to slowly trek across. Far more responsive than the parachute, the wing suit is the perfect option for when you're stuck and have seemingly nowhere to turn. Make understanding its subtleties a priority.



London Calling

15 Things

you need to know about Assassin's Creed Syndicate and how it could save the Creed series

3

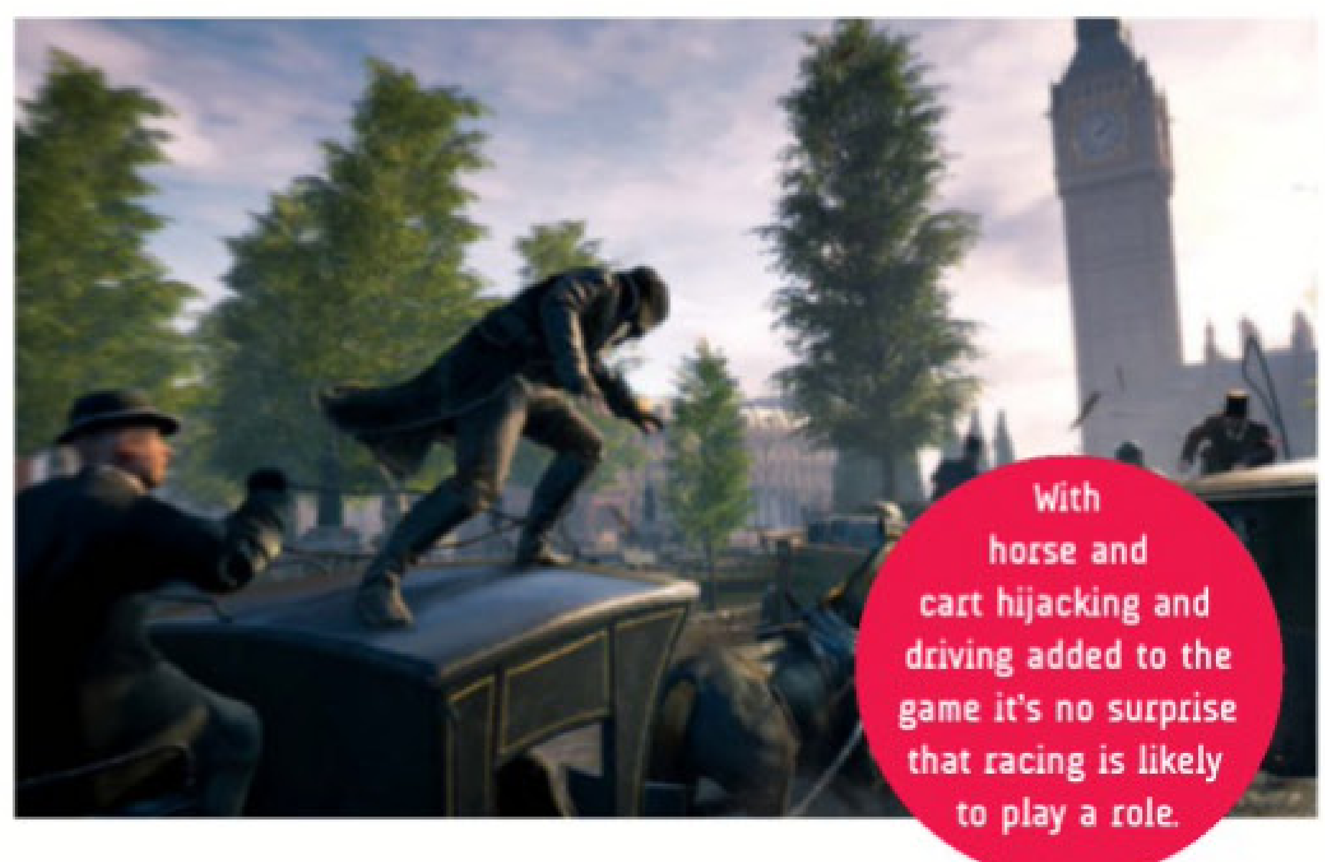
ASSASSIN'S CREED SYNDICATE

Studio: Ubisoft Quebec **Directed by:** Marc-Alexis Côté
Supporting cast: Ubisoft Montreal, Ubisoft Singapore, Ubisoft Annecy, Ubisoft Montpellier, Reflections, Ubisoft Chengdu, Ubisoft Shanghai and Ubisoft Kiev



It's bigger and braver

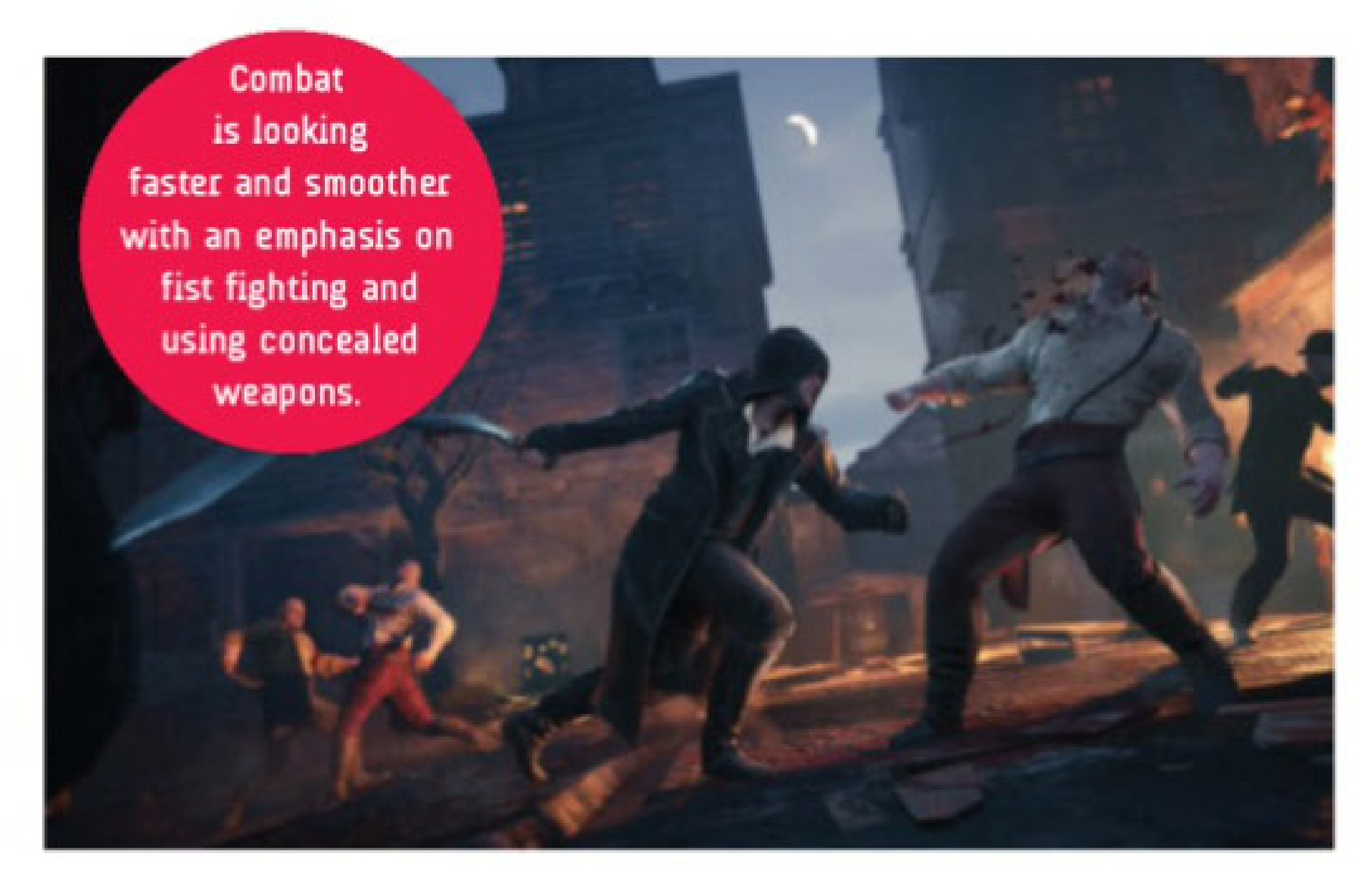
1 Whatever you might want to say about *Assassin's Creed Unity*, there can be no denying that its re-creation of revolutionary Paris was impressive. Behind the bugs, it was a gorgeously detailed and rich world. London is that and more in *Syndicate*. At the height of Britain's imperial power and industrial might, London is the centre of the world and it shows. Buildings are larger, streets are busier and the politics of the era are more nuanced and complex than those of revolutionary France. The world is building towards a confrontation between rich and poor, old world and new world. And *Syndicate* is placing the assassins right at the heart of it.



With horse and cart hijacking and driving added to the game it's no surprise that racing is likely to play a role.

The Twin effect

2 For the first time *Assassin's Creed* will feature two playable assassins through the campaign in Jacob and Evie Frye, twins from the outskirts of London travelling into the metropolis for the first time and looking to make their mark on the world. It's believed that you won't be switching between the characters at will however, as each has their own traits and strengths that will benefit different sections of the game. Their shared DNA has been mentioned as an important factor in them both being playable in the game, so expect some animus breaks between character sections.



Combat is looking faster and smoother with an emphasis on fist fighting and using concealed weapons.

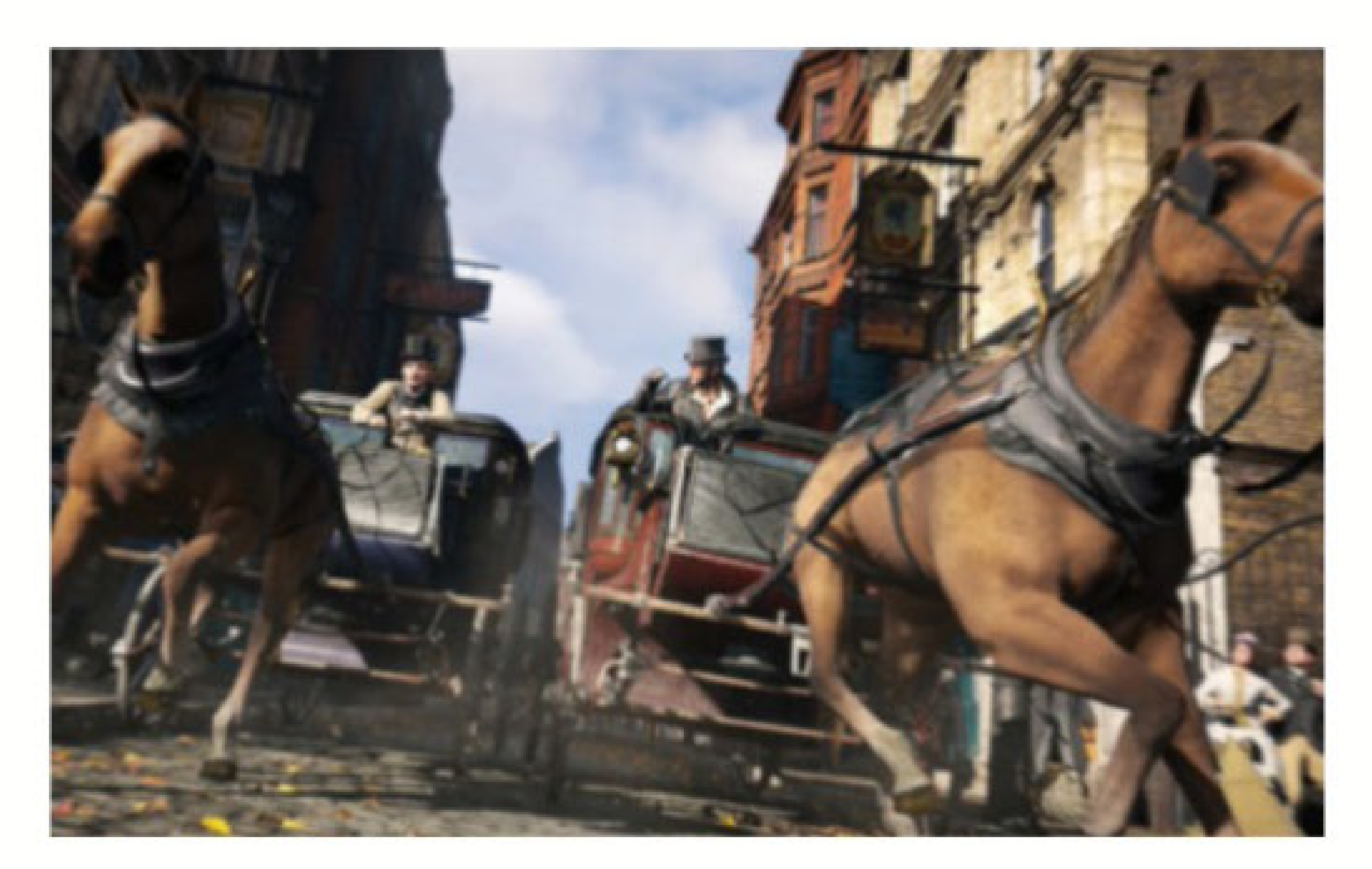
They're born to be bad

3 One of the things we are particularly pleased to hear about, is that these two new assassins are not new to the Order, but rather were raised in it. They know how to be assassins and know their way around their tools. What's more, their attitude to the struggle ahead appears to be driven out of a devotion to the creed and a love of the job at hand, not revenge or some sombre inner struggle. *Assassin's Creed* has been at its best when it is a celebration of freedom and the lead character embraces their skills and arsenal. Jacob in particular appears to revel in his surroundings and in the fight, so he should be a pleasure to play as. Jacob has to be one of the odder assassins see to date though, switching his top hat for a hood when he so pleases and sporting a thick London accent.



It's Grand Theft Carriage

4 One of the major new additions to *Syndicate* also has broader ramifications for the game as a whole, carriages have been added as drivable, stealable vehicles. It brings a little of the streets of San Andreas to the cobbles of London, but also means faster ground travel as you can hop onto the back of a carriage and whip your way around the streets. The carriages, which vary from fancier closed top vehicles to cheaper, open-backed commercial setups, can also be used for stealth purposes by hiding in them, giving you some mobile cover ideal for quick escapes when you're in trouble. The key impact it has though is much wider streets, requiring some new tools in your assassin bag.



You're the Dark Knight of London

5 The addition of a grappling hook zip-line to your gauntlet adds some interesting new options to how you choose to move around the city. For a start it speeds up your ascent up the side of buildings, helping you reach the summit of some of London's rather immense architecture in a nippier fashion. Most importantly, it can be used to zip-line between buildings across these much wider streets, bridging gaps that in previous titles would have been impossible to traverse in a single move. Whether this might remove a little of the fun of climbing that we've enjoyed up until now we're not sure, but it seems like a necessary addition.

Combat has changed forever

6 Another logical change for the time period and environment, which has a major impact on the traditional *Assassin's Creed* experience, is that in this era of history, walking around with weapons strapped to your hips isn't looked upon very favourably. Swords, axes, crossbows and rifles are basically out and concealed weapons are in, which should be perfect for the assassin order. A concealed sword in »

a cane, hidden blades, a revolver, and brass knuckles have been highlighted so far as your key weapons heading into this new battle. But new weapons also mean brand new fighting methods.

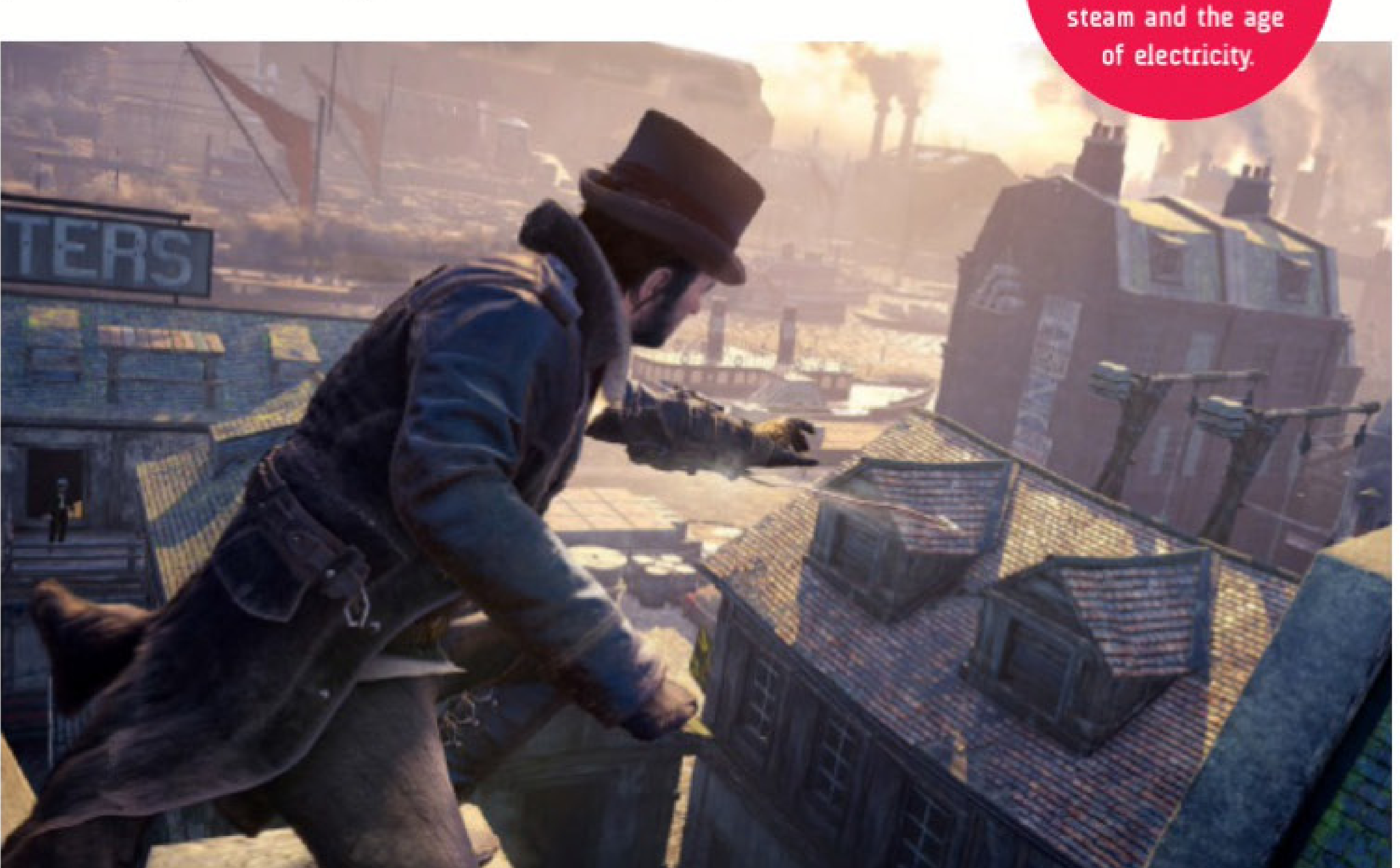
Combat has been refined

7 We already saw a mild evolution of the combat for *Assassin's Creed Unity*, attempting to bring some new immediacy to the fight while also increasing the challenge and forcing some more tactical approaches at times. Without the heavy swords you might normally wield, the emphasis is now on being swift and aggressive, at least when you're playing as Jacob Frye. Leaning perhaps a little on Guy Richie's interpretation of *Sherlock Holmes* and his pugilistic feats, boxing and counter fighting is the order of the day, finishing things off with a small blade or gun.



It's an age of political awakening

8 Set in 1868, this is the year after the publication of Karl Marx's Das Kapital with both Marx and Friedrich Engels likely residing in London during this period. As such issues of working class rights, freedom of speech, and fair payment are as important as ever and the disparity between rich and poor is stark, particularly in the melting pot of London. Jacob and Evie step into the middle of this tense situation and immediately side with the working poor. The fact that the game is called *Syndicate*, referring to the unionisation of working people, points to just how important the politics of the era is likely to be.



Assassin's Creed Syndicate sits on a tipping point between the age of steam and the age of electricity.



There's a definite steampunk vibe to what we've seen of the assassin gauntlet so far and that's fine by us.

And the government is in the balance

9 Another major change specific to the United Kingdom in this period was the expansion of voting rights in the country, allowing even more people the right to vote. However, it would still be another 50 years before universal suffrage was applied and ten more after that before women had the same voting rights as men. Against this backdrop, there were also three Prime Ministers in 1868 with the first retiring due to ill health and the second losing an election. Expect to see Benjamin Disraeli and William Gladstone play a part in *Syndicate*'s story as a result.



It wouldn't be a game set in London if it wasn't tipping it down with rain from time to time.

Boroughs break it down

10 Seven Templars for seven boroughs. That's how London has been broken down as you must expand the influence of the assassin order and take back control of the streets from the Templars. Each borough has its own unique mix of interests and local population, some being richer, others poorer and each will likely present a different Templar threat that needs taking out. Bloody Nora is the first Templar boss to be revealed so far and she poses the challenge of a massive criminal network that needs beating down and convinced to switch allegiances.

And the police will act differently

11 One interesting dynamic element for *Syndicate* is the suggestion that you'll be able to get away with certain actions in some places and not in others. To explain, Westminster for instance as the hub of politics in the capital is well policed so starting brawls and killing people will get you a lot of grief, but moving into the back streets where the police don't patrol will give you more freedom. Likewise, there are some locations, such as Whitechapel, that are corrupted by criminal activity.

The historical figures are strong

12 Alongside the likes of Engels and Marx as they begin to lay out the philosophy of socialism and communism, 1868 is an age packed with good historical figures to call upon. Charles Darwin and Charles Dickens (who would pass away a few short years later) have already been confirmed for a pre-order DLC mission, but are likely to play a deeper role for all in the game. *Syndicate* is also set only a few years after the end of the American Civil War, so expect figures from that era to be mentioned and perhaps make an appearance. Between authors, political thinkers, activists, humanitarians and leaders, this is a rich period of history to mine for stories.



London looks to be one of the most perilous environments *Assassin's Creed* has ever placed us in.

The stealth is 'softer'

13 Back to gameplay, stealth has been described as 'softer' by the Ubisoft team. It means that the snap cover system introduced in Unity has gone in one of the few examples of a direct allusion to improvements from the last game. Instead we have a soft cover system to enjoy allowing you to sidle up to cover rather than locking to it. It's still a button press system for entering stealth though and you can expect fun memes about where Jacob's hat goes when he puts his hood up.

The city is your weapon

14 That is unfortunately a horribly generic and overused turn of phrase, but the addition of environmental takedowns is long overdue and most welcome in *Assassin's Creed Syndicate*. Using throwing knives you can chop down heavy objects being hauled into warehouses or shops and have them fall on enemies. There have tended to be ground-level items like this that you could interact with, but this is something much more dynamic than those pre-scripted animations.

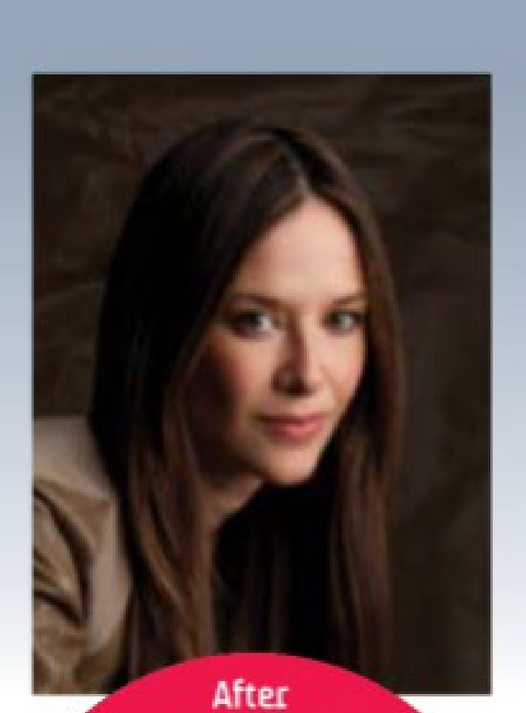
And you might go underground

15 This is purely speculative, but the timing works out rather nicely for *Assassin's Creed Syndicate* to take you down into the beginnings of what would become London's Underground network. Operation of the Underground system began in 1863 with trains passing from Paddington to Farringdon, with wooden carriages and powered by a steam engine. In 1868 a line from South Kensington to Westminster was also opened. And how cool would it be to explore this early version of the massive network?

"Jacob in particular appears to revel in his surroundings and in the fight"

The Jade Empire

We sat down with Jade Raymond, the original producer of the Assassin's Creed series and one of its leading creative minds to reflect on the series and her career in gaming to date



After leaving Ubisoft Montreal in 2010, Raymond applied what she had learnt to starting her own Ubisoft Toronto studio as managing director, making *Splinter Cell: Blacklist*

Could you tell us about the early days of *Assassin's Creed*?
I was hired at Ubisoft to be a producer of what was going to be the next-gen *Prince Of Persia* and it was a small team in place… We started working on a concept and we really wanted to set the bar high and we didn't even really know what next-gen was but we knew there was this myth of next-gen and eventually we were going to get the dev kits. We just wanted to set the bar high and think about what would be really different in terms of experience. The more we worked on the concept of what we wanted to create the more we agreed that it needed to be a new IP and so I did an internal sales pitch to convince upper management that we needed to make a new IP.

There was a great energy behind the game very quickly. What was it like riding that wave?
It was amazing. We had such high ambitions. That was over ten years ago now and it was a pretty young team. We were all pretty convinced that we were going to do something remarkable. That was the point. So, it was great to finally get to talk to people about it and it was great that people were thinking that what we were doing was pushing boundaries, because that was definitely our intention.

It feels like a long time since we've had a game that captured people's imaginations to such a degree.

It did mean that I didn't sleep much for the last few months though. It was like 'Oh my God, everyone's expecting this to be great and we have to ship!' Obviously with a game like that we had such big ambitions, but ultimately we have to ship. All the things that we wanted to put into the game we didn't get into the first one.

It seems almost as if history repeated itself for Ubisoft's *Watch Dogs* and *Unity*. Why can it be such a struggle to get across that finishing line?
I think it's important to set the bar high and it does push the team and that's how you do good things. And if you set it really high and you only manage to do 80 per cent, you still

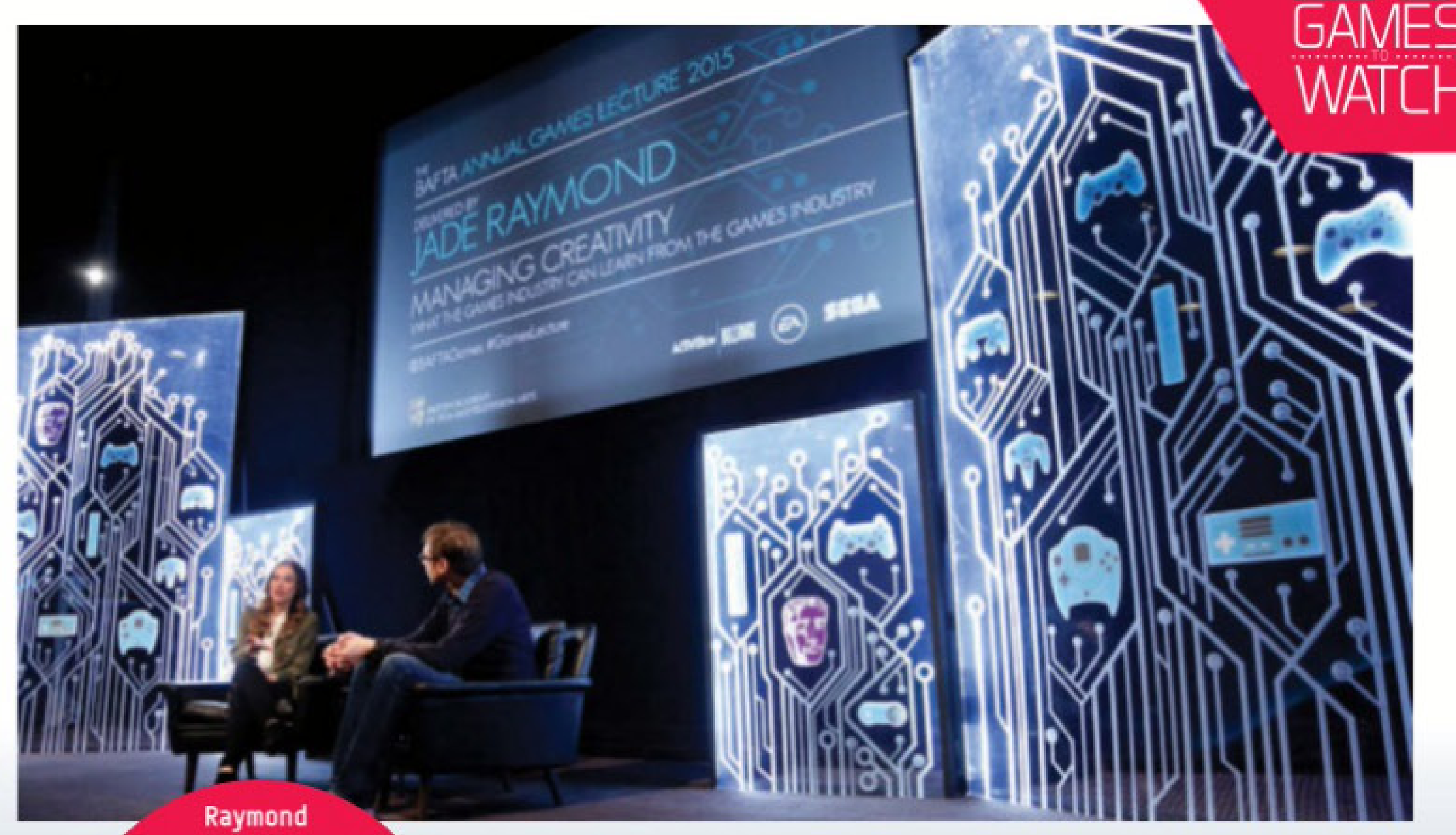
manage to do something that's interesting or different. But it also means that there's a lot more pressure and you don't want to be letting gamers down. I still remember when the reviews came out for the first *Assassin's Creed*… We were reading the reviews and we were just so devastated, because even though it still got a decent Metacritic all we could see were the things that we knew were wrong and that we wanted to fix, but we couldn't.

Did you get to reinvest that energy into the next game?
That was what was great, because it was the same core team that got to work on *ACII* and *Brotherhood*. It was all of the same people who were there for the first one. There were even some ideas that we had prototyped in the first one that at some points were working, but we didn't have time to finish that didn't even make it into the game until *Assassin's Creed III*. *Assassin's Creed III* finally had climbing on trees and we actually had a prototype of that working before our first E3 reveal. We just didn't have time to fully implement the system.

How did things change for you after the release of *Assassin's Creed*?
It was definitely a little bit difficult towards the end of the *Assassin's Creed* press run, because it sort of blew up out of control and there were all those sexist things, so I purposely decided to a step out of the spotlight on the second one even though I had a similarly big role, I just didn't want to talk about what I was doing anymore so much. The funny thing is that now that I've had great opportunities to work on other things, I was part of the initial team on *Watch Dogs*, worked on other new IPs and started the studio in Toronto, but I was still associated with that, because it was the time I was most in the spotlight talking about it. I guess it was also really my big breakthrough moment where I got to apply what I had learnt previously and put a lot of myself into a project and it was also a new IP. So, I guess it's been a pretty big turning point in my career.

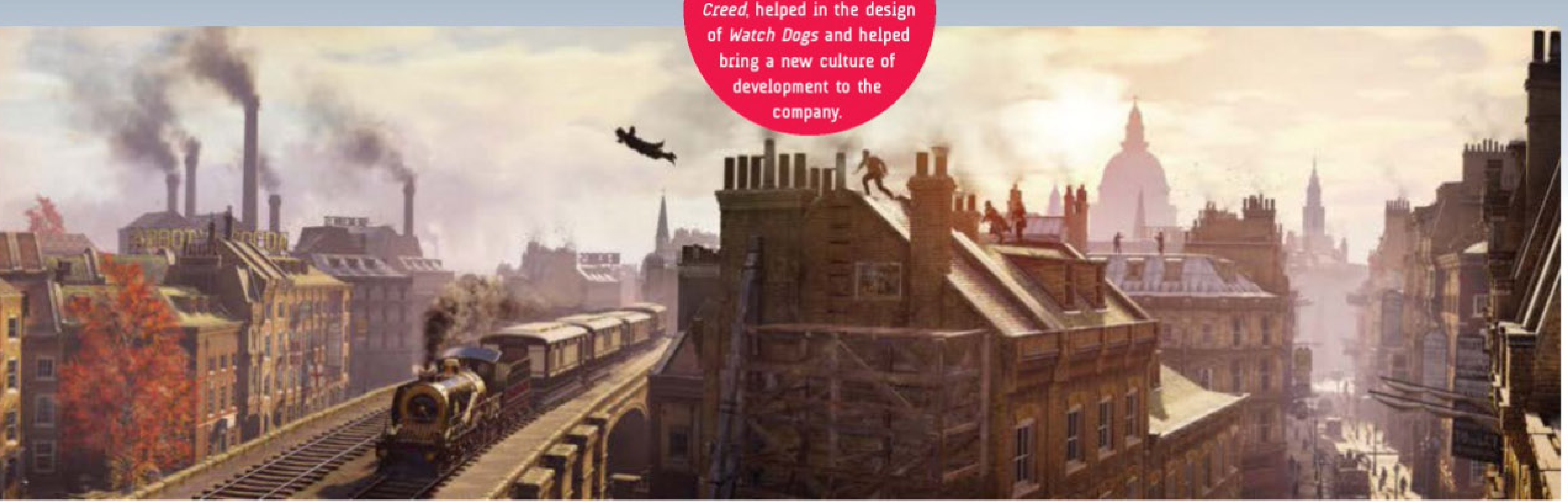
Do you still feel a close connection to the *Creed* franchise?
No, not so much anymore. I don't want this to be taken the wrong way, but let's say you had a kid and you always dreamed that your daughter was going to become a doctor, but ultimately she grows up and she decides to become a teacher instead. And being a teacher is great and it's very valuable, but you sort of had in your head that they were going to be a doctor. So, you're just like, 'Well, it's their own life right now, so that's great. So long as they're happy, I'm happy'. I think it's sort of that feeling. One of the things that was great about building a franchise from scratch is that we really wanted to take advantage of that position to make a franchise that we thought could live long-term, which you don't often get the chance to do… So, with *Assassin's Creed* we actually did spend a bit of time thinking about the franchise and how the story would evolve and what we wanted to happen. There are certain things that we put in place that did eventually get into the other games and that was exciting with *ACII* and *Brotherhood* and getting all the gameplay features there. But there were other things, with the core team we had a certain vision for how we saw the story was going to unfold and things were going to happen and it didn't end up going that way. It's bigger than I ever imagined it would be or that any of us ever imagined it would be. We're amazed by that success, but it's also not quite what I had in mind.

"We were all pretty convinced that we were about to do something remarkable. That was the point"



Raymond recently gave a BAFTA Games Lecture, where she said the games industry should use the incentivisation it uses for gamers to motivate development teams to excel.

Raymond left Ubisoft in October 2014, having established *Assassin's Creed*, helped in the design of *Watch Dogs* and helped bring a new culture of development to the company.



games™

GAMES TO WATCH 4-20

343 Industries and Microsoft has recently started up an ARG (that's alternate reality game) supporting the release of *Halo 5*. It's not as subtle or interesting as the original *Halo 2* campaign, dubbed 'I love bees', that went far and wide to hide its references, but at least it's something to expand the game's complex lore.

Named 'Hunt the Truth', the ARG tasks players with uncovering various clues littered across the internet, supposedly telling the story of Benjamin Giraud – a fictional journalist hired to do an in-depth profile of John-117, or Master Chief. Some clues are the words that appeared on a bullet that sped towards Chief's Spartan helmet in a recent trailer for the game (Son, Abductee, Victim, Orphan, Recruit, Solider, Warrior, Ally, Hero, Survivor, Traitor).

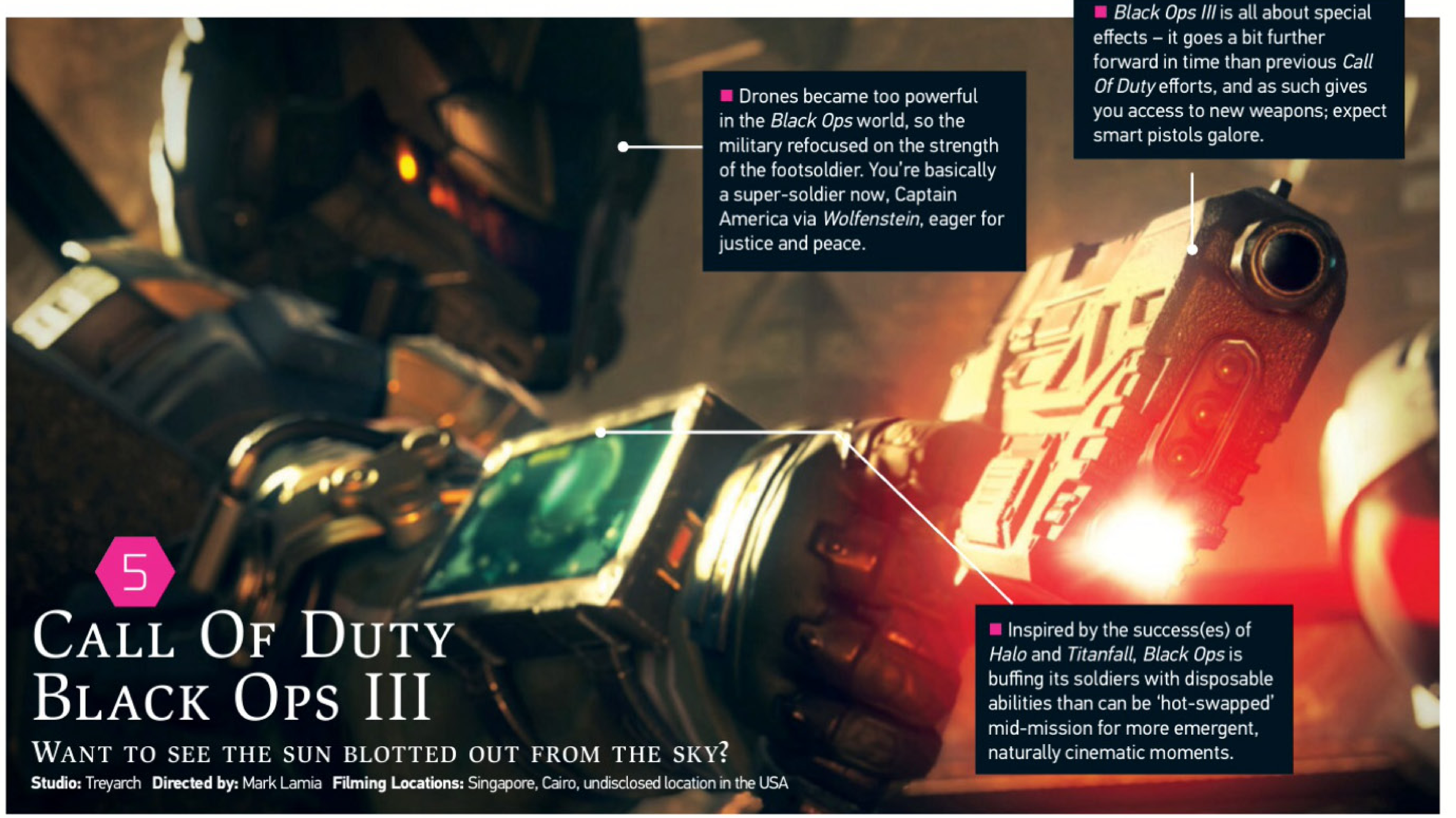
After that, devout fans uncovered a series of Star Maps hidden across Hunt The Truth's tumblr, Facebook and official site pages. The resultant map seems to be a compilation that points to a new system in our galaxy – the location of the new campaign, no doubt – the place Chief has absconded to, the place Locke will hunt him to… the place where they'll eventually throw down.

4

Halo 5: Guardians

Locke and load

Studio: 343 Industries **Written by:** Brian Reed
Supporting Cast: Jen Taylor (Cortana), Mike Colter (Agent Jameson Locke), Steve Downes (John-117)



■ *Black Ops III* is all about special effects – it goes a bit further forward in time than previous *Call Of Duty* efforts, and as such gives you access to new weapons; expect smart pistols galore.

■ Drones became too powerful in the *Black Ops* world, so the military refocused on the strength of the footsoldier. You're basically a super-soldier now, Captain America via *Wolfenstein*, eager for justice and peace.

■ Inspired by the success(es) of *Halo* and *Titanfall*, *Black Ops* is buffing its soldiers with disposable abilities than can be 'hot-swapped' mid-mission for more emergent, naturally cinematic moments.

5

Call Of Duty Black Ops III

Want to see the sun blotted out from the sky?

Studio: Treyarch **Directed by:** Mark Lamia **Filming Locations:** Singapore, Cairo, undisclosed location in the USA



6

Star Wars Battlefront

Watch this space

Studio: DICE **Locations:** Hoth, Endor, Tatooine, Sullust

For the maps DICE is including in the game, the art and development teams simply travelled to where the films were actually shot to gather reference for their photogrammetry process – Tattooine, Hoth and Endor all received this fairly straightforward treatment.

A whole new planet – Sullust, based on an off-handed line in *Return Of The Jedi* –required a whole new approach, though: so DICE travelled to its neighbouring Iceland. Studying the volcanic swells and black rocks of the country lead to Sullust's unique appearance: a base of black obsidian and volcanic rock, highlighted with almost fluorescent red lava plumes and jets of white smoke.

But Sullust isn't home to just dangerous terrain, oh no – the Empire is using the planet's naturally white-hot surface to aid in construction of the Death Star, so the terrain is hiding some pretty huge galactic secrets: from mining facilities boring down into the planet's mantle, to large parts of a proto-Death Star there's more to keep your eye on than just lakes of lava…

7

Forza 6

Gotta go fast(er)

Studio: Turn 10 Studios
Director: Dan Greenawalt
Starring: Ford GT

Videogames aren't just vessels for your entertainment, oh no. When a series like *Forza* can all but guarantee an audience in the millions, manufacturers and businesses with vested interests in your area of expertise are going to want to captialise on that. That's the case with *Forza 6*, anyway, with Ford jumping in with Turn 10 and Microsoft to make a game that's better for the developers and end-users alike.

The Ford GT will be the cover star for *Forza 6*, alongside a whole roster of Ford's high-performance vehicles (think Raptor, think Mustang) and all Turn 10 had to do was give the car a cover in its game. In return? The development team got to work directly with design teams at Ford while the GT was in development – knowing of the car's existence before practically anyone else in the world. It's the first time in gaming we're seeing a car and a game release at the same time… how's that for a landmark?

8

Fable Legends

This might not be the Albion you remember

Studio: Lionhead Studios
Director: David Eckleberry
Writer: Andrew Walsh

Fable Legends is a free-to-play game, but Lionhead isn't letting that 'affect the game in the middle', to use the studio's own vernacular. Let's backtrack a little – *Fable* hasn't been the series we came to know when Molyneux began development on the series since 2011. After *Fable 3*'s troubled reception, Lionhead and Microsoft opted to take the series off-piste a little, releasing an on-rails, motion-controlled effort in 2011 and a side-scrolling beat-em-up in 2012 with *Fable Heroes*.

Fable Legends seems to form the bookend of this non-conventional genre-hopping route the series has taken, and promises not to lock players out of any part of the game with paywalls, nor hold them back with pay-to-fill energy bars or cooldowns.

Interestingly enough, Lionhead is also keen to allow cross-play between PC and Xbox One – something that has typically been an area of contention for Microsoft. If Lionhead can pull it off (and we've every faith that it can), *Legends* may well open the floodgates for more cross-play and free-to-play games.



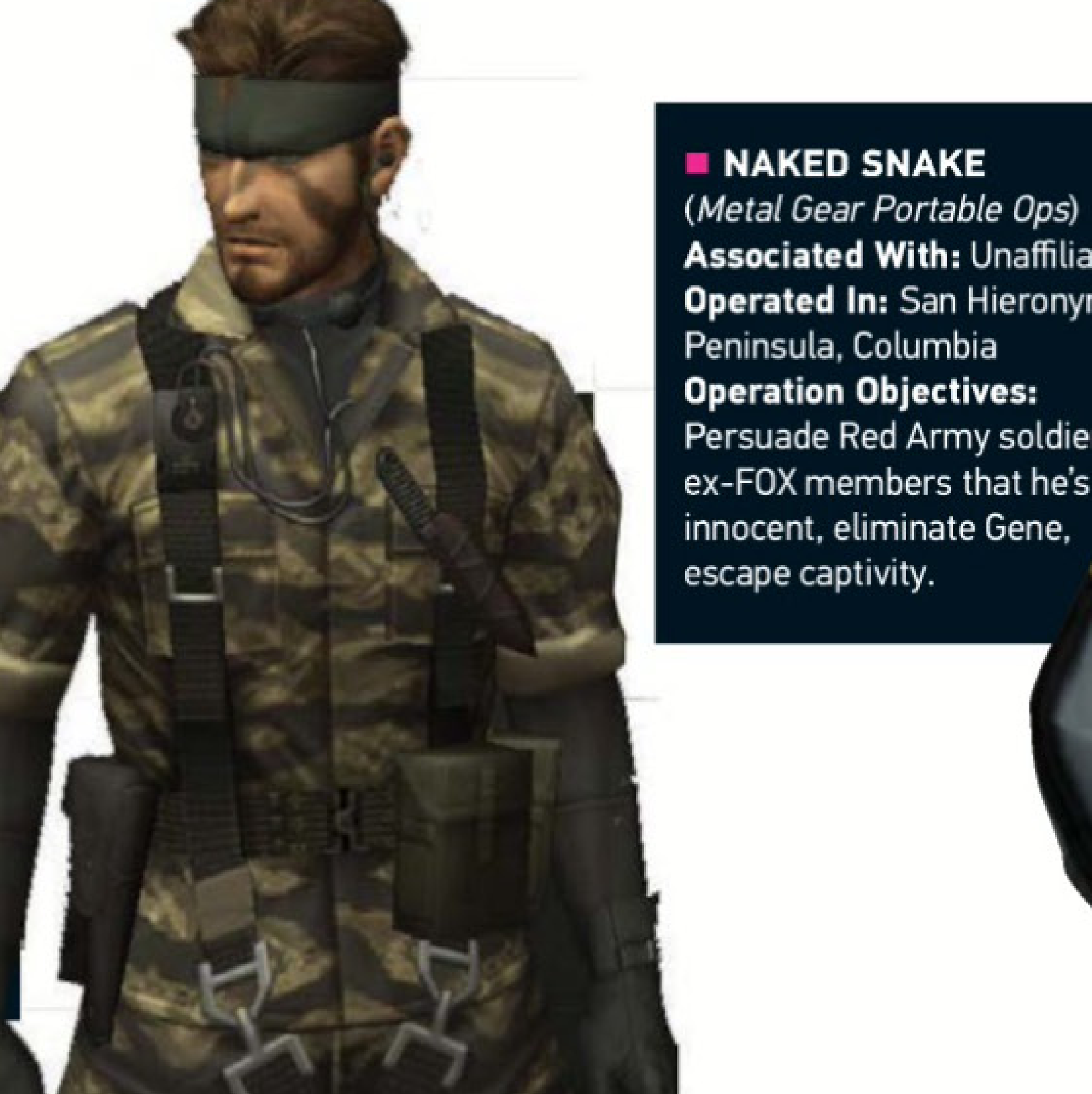
9

Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain

Is this the final boss?

Studio: Kojima Productions
Director: Hideo Kojima
Art Director: Yoji Shinkawa
Written By: Hideo Kojima, Shuyo Murata, Hidenari Inamura

This is the last time you'll see a *Metal Gear* game made by Hideo Kojima, if recent events are to be believed. As such, we're expecting something punctuated, something final, to come out of the game's story. The death of Big Boss, maybe, or a nuke that ends the world. We're terrified. But we're not here to mourn, we're here to celebrate Big Boss' legacy...



NAKED SNAKE
(*Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater*)
Associated With: FOX
Operated In: Tselinoyarsk, USSR
Operation Objectives: Eliminate The Boss for defection to USSR, reclaim stolen US nuclear deterrent.

NAKED SNAKE
(*Metal Gear Portable Ops*)
Associated With: Unaffiliated
Operated In: San Hieronymo Peninsula, Columbia
Operation Objectives: Persuade Red Army soldiers/ex-FOX members that he's innocent, eliminate Gene, escape captivity.



10

Street Fighter V

Let's fighting love!

Studio: Capcom
Producer: Yoshinori Ono
Supporting Cast: Ryu, Charlie Nash, M. Bison, Chun-Li



It looks like *Street Fighter*'s evolution is following its old template pretty closely – where *Street Fighter IV* was modelled on the mechanics and presentation of *Street Fighter II*, the fifth iteration of Capcom's core franchise seems to be riffing off *Street Fighter 3rd Strike*.

There seem to be tech throws, new stances and even parries shown in gameplay trailers so far, which shows Capcom is moving in a more technical direction. Charlie Nash is here – a fighter we've seen nothing of since *Street Fighter Alpha II*. Yes, the man that taught Guile his trademark Sonic Boom is back…

There's a beta rolling out for the game soon, and we're pretty sure we're on the verge of learning a little bit more about the roster, too, outside of the meagre four confirmed fighters.



11

Deus Ex Mankind Divided

It gives you wings

Studio: Eidos Montreal **Director:** Jean-Francois Dugas **Composer:** Michael McCann

Picture this: you've got a vessel. A fine ship once, the old boat is starting to fall apart. So you replace some of the boards on the hull. Then you begin to renew the starboard side, then the port side. When does the ship no longer become the ship you once owned? Does it stay the same entity, or does it change when it becomes fully renewed? That's the foundation of age-old philosophical theory 'the ship of Theseus', and it's basically what *Deus Ex: Mankind Divided* is all about.

There are those that would persecute and segregate the enhanced men and women of the world, because they believe they are, in essence, no longer human. As with all suppression, this breeds contempt, frustration, violence. So the enhanced people of the earth rebel, attack their suppressors. A proxy war is born, and its terrorists versus the establishment, with civilians getting caught in the middle. Adam Jensen – the man back from the dead depicted so righteously in the supporting imagery – steps into play, but whether he becomes an angel of vengeance or one of salvation is yet to be determined… and by us, no less.

SNAKE/BIG BOSS
(*Metal Gear Solid: Peace Walker*)
Associated With: Militaires Sans Frontieres
Operated In: Undisclosed province, Costa Rica
Operation Objectives: Liberate Costa Rica from invading forces, prevent global nuclear warfare threatened by splinter-CIA and KGB soldiers.

BIG BOSS
(*Metal Gear Solid V: Ground Zeroes*)
Associated With: Militaires Sans Frontieres
Operated In: US Black Ops site, Cuba
Operation Objectives: Rescue Chico – a child soldier held by Skullface and XOF – and Paz who hold sensitive information regarding his mission.

VENOM SNAKE
(*Metal Gear Solid V: Phantom Pain*)
Associated With: Diamond Dogs
Operated In: Afghanistan
Operation Objectives: Track down the men responsible for Militaires Sans Frontieres destruction, rescue Kazuhira Miller and prevent 'Cipher' from completing its new weapon – a system that could surpass even the potential of the Metal Gear weapons.



12 Overwatch

Gods among us

Studio: Blizzard Entertainment
Director(s): Jeff Kaplan, Aaron Keller
Artist: Bill Petras
Designers: Jeremy Craig, Michael Elliot, Scott Mercer

The Omnic Crisis nearly wiped out humanity. It nearly cost us all organic life on earth. The Omnic robots – so named by their creators because of their uncanny likeness to human consciousness, despite being AI – rebelled against their creators and began a campaign to wipe out humanity. As a last-ditch effort, the united forces of Earth put together the Overwatch – a peacekeeping unit of super soldiers equipped with *ridiculous* tech.

The Overwatch succeeded in halting the Omnic threat, and remained as a peacekeeping force across the globe (think *Halo*'s Spartans, and their surprisingly dark origin story). Resentment began to build against the Overwatch, and soon accusations of corruption and sedition ran rampant, and the force was left with no other option than to disband.

Doesn't that sound like a mix of Moore's *Watchmen* and Bungie's *Halo*? That's not a bad thing – we're perfectly happy to see games channeling those stories. Maybe it means we'll even end up getting a shooter with some interesting lore and backstory to it. And, by now, we know Blizzard can handle lore… arguably better than anyone. Whether it succeeds in knitting together a functional and tight FPS remains to be seen, though – it's a big step outside of the studio's comfort zone. The studio is focussing on making this a team game, though – there's not even a deathmatch option – so we hope the end goal lives up to its creators vision. Much like the Omnic robots themselves…

13 Rise Of The Tomb Raider

Tools of the trade

Studio: Crystal Dynamics
Writer: Rhianna Pratchett
Starring: Camilla Luddington (Lara Croft)

We all know Lara as a plucky spelunker with an addiction to adrenaline, but where would she be without her various tomb raiding implements? We examine her equipment to see what it tells us about her newest adventure…

RECURVE BOW
Scrounged from *somewhere*, this Byzantine Recurve Bow is made of field maple, with gold etched into the wood. Pretty but functional, we hope we have to rely on this *more* than the guns we're packing…

TACTICAL KNIFE & SHEATH
The Soviet design of Lara's Tactical knife has a six-inch blade – perfect for skinning animals and for self-defence alike. We anticipate more CQC takedowns since the knife is so prominent.

NECKLACE
A jade pendant, tied with a slipknot, a trophy of past exploits. Reminds Lara that supernatural beings walk the earth.

HANDGUN
Lara's hand was forced to murder in the last game, and now she's no stranger to killing – her Nagant revolver is always equipped and ready. Expect a serious load of combat.

AXE
Lara's aluminium DMM-inspired ice axe is back, telling us there'll be more verticality in the level design, more climbing and even more tumbling down to the ground.

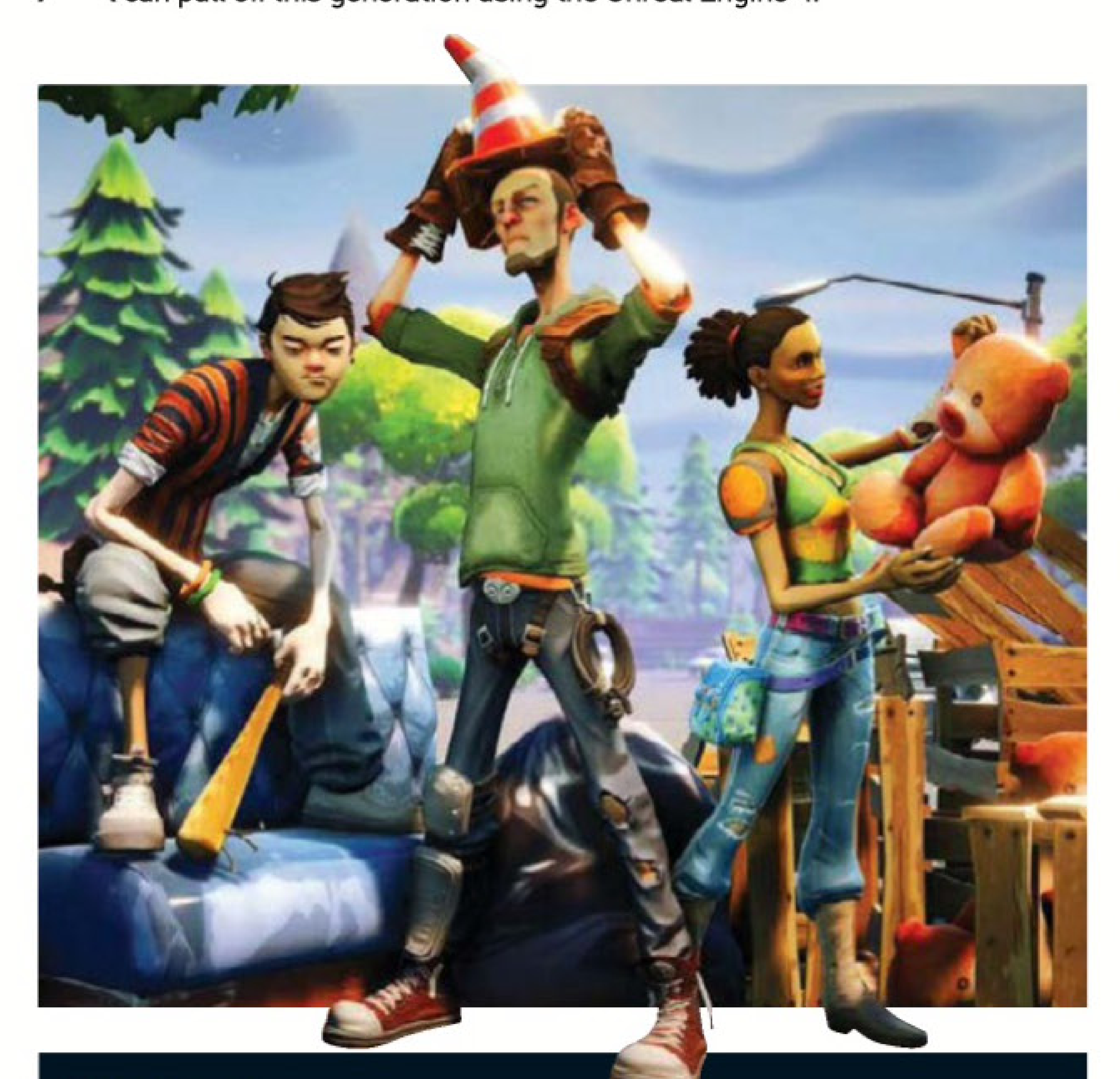
14

Fortnite

2.8 hours later…

Studio: Epic Games
Producer(s): Grant Shonkwilker, Tanya Watson
Artist: Pete Ellis

A sharp move away from *Gears Of War*, right? The cartoony style really suits *Fortnite*, though, we think, and we're intrigued to see what Epic can pull off this generation using the Unreal Engine 4.



IN THE DAY
You're tasked with travelling around the neighbourhood, searching for debris and scraps and bits and bobs for to make yourself a fortress and keep the zombies out.



AT NIGHT
This is when the fun starts. Epic has clearly taken its cues from its *Gears Of War* experience and its various horde modes, because every evening they'll come. And there's nothing you can do to stop them… only to attempt to prevent the inevitable.

15

No Man's Sky

Talking about my generation

Studio: Hello Games
Director(s): Sean Murray, David Ream
Designer: Gareth Bourn
Soundtrack by: 65daysofstatic, Paul Weir

No Man's Sky (In Numbers)

18,446,744,073,709,551,616
The number of planets you can explore in-game

2.589 billion
That's the number of planets in-game per *real* person on Earth

73
The number of planets each human would need to discover per minute *for life* if we wanted to discover them all

10%
of all planets will have life (yes, including dinosaurs)

3
types of ship are available to you: Fighter / Trader / Explorer

10
The amount of people working on the game



Final Fantasy XV

From Duscae 'Til Dawn

Studio: Square Enix
Director: Hajime Tabata
Written by: Kazushige Nojima

We've played through the entire *Episode Duscae* demo – the promotional slice of gameplay Square Enix released earlier this year – and we're excited. At the time of writing, the developer-publisher has stated that we can look forward to a new patch for the demo releasing in a few weeks – a demo that will update and refine some of the controls and mechanics debuted so far.

That's important. It proves that Square Enix is listening, it shows that the studio *knows* it can't afford to make another slip-up regarding the long-running franchise, and under the watchful eye of new director Hajime Tabata, that seems unlikely to happen again.

Before the updated demo was deployed, Square Enix offered an international survey for fans of the game to play – and publically released the results. The studio has been open about this feedback, and has been keen to hear fans reactions to the, umm, reaction. It's a new age for *Final Fantasy*, and Square itself, and we're looking forward to how much more of the game the developer will show at Tokyo Games Show this autumn.

17

Rainbow Six: Siege

It's raiding men!

Studio: Ubisoft Montreal **Made Using:** Anvil Next **Designer:** Andrew WittsCroft

Your guide to Rainbow Six Siege's operatives

OPERATIVE: Ash
SPECIALITY: Demolitions
FBI agent-on-loan Ash is a shotgun specialist, preferring to get close to her enemies to take them down. But she's also handy for more tactical breaches and can set up a device to break walls.

OPERATIVE: Mute
SPECIALITY: Intel
A true specialist, Mute's name comes from the soldier's tendency to jam enemies' communications and radars. As a result, this operative is a little weaker than most in firefights, but can still be lethal when necessary.

OPERATIVE: Thermite
SPECIALITY: Demolitions
Thermite is your tank, as well as your demolitions expert. Your best bet with playing him is to dash out in front of your enemies (drawing fire away from Sledge) and lay explosives down.

OPERATIVE: Thatcher
SPECIALITY: Electronics
Equipped with EMP grenades, Thatcher is best staying back and helping you lock down an area, or running ahead to disable enemy comms immediately. He can also disable enemy traps.

OPERATIVE: Sledge
SPECIALITY: Destruction
Taking his name from the sledgehammer he drags into combat, Sledge is your front-line guy – trained at ripping through enemy barricades, he needs cover but can tear open enemies with his carbine.





18

Xenoblade Chronicles X

It is not down to any map; true places never are

Studio: Monolith Soft **Writer/Director:** Tetsuya Takahashi **Composer:** Hiroyuki Sawano

Did you like *Pacific Rim*? Then you'll love *Xenoblade Chronicles X*. We make that comparison, but it only really goes as far as giant mechs battling giant monsters – that's about where all parallels can be called off. Otherwise, *Xenoblade Chronicles X* is an apocalyptic, dystopian tale of a humanity on the brink.

You're reduced to salvaging on the surface of the planet Mira – where your arc ship, the White Whale, crash landed in some suspicious circumstances.

It's all very JRPG so far, but what's interesting is that functionally, the game seems to be pushing the Wii U *hard*. When you crest a particularly massive hillside and catch a glimpse of the canyon below, you run the risk of getting emotional. It's *huge*, and we never thought the Wii U could pull that kind of scale off. There's no confirmed date for a Western release yet, but rest assured: after the popularity of the 3DS remake of *Xenoblade*, we're definitely going to see it.



19

Guitar Hero Live

Getting the band back together

Studio: FreeStyleGames **Soundtrack:** Queen, Weezer, Alice In Chains

After a five-year hiatus, *Guitar Hero* is back. Having dropped Neversoft as developers, the game brings FreeStyleGames backstage. The studio will be in charge of sorting out all the intricate wiring; keeping the servers up and running, making sure there's enough content to go around, providing the same service to all fans across *six* platforms (Wii U, PS3, PS4, Xbox 360, Xbox One and iOS).

The game's main difference from its predecessors is the inclusion of full-motion video for the live performances. Activision and FreeStyleGames went to the trouble of hiring, producing and recording real bands to make the illusion as convincing as possible. We were dubious of this idea, but soon the allure of FreeStyle took us in.

Considering *Guitar Hero* is trying to manoeuvre itself to be as far away from party-game rivals *Rock Band*, we'll be getting a far more Score Attack-based game than we've seen previously. With a guitar peripheral that's been rejigged to feel more *real*, this is a reboot the series deserves.

20

Mad Max

On the road again

Studio: Avalanche Studios
Director: Frank Rooke
Musician: Mats Lundgren

What the game shares with Fury Road

(Movie spoilers inbound)

- Ammo and guns are "Limited Edition Beanie Baby" levels of rare
- The War Boys are after your blood
- Gastown – it's a main location in the game
- Bloody faction-on-faction warfare
- You'll have to attack and raid convoys
- There are dust hurricanes *everywhere*
- You can customise your vehicle with the bodies of your enemies



LIFE AFTER KOJIMA

With his rumoured departure imminent, games™ looks at the one-of-a-kind game creator to see… is he all he's cracked up to be?



Regardless of what happens to the series in the future, Konami knows it can release an image like this one and fans will explode with anticipation.

At the time of writing, Hideo Kojima's future at Konami is in the balance. To say the man is a 'personality' developer is a huge understatement – he's one of the few with his name plastered on game boxes, he's the only one with a *studio* named after him, he is kind of a big deal. So when the man goes silent – when his name is quietly removed from marketing materials for his games – you start to think that something major is going on behind the scenes. Rumours began to swell in the middle of March that the long-time Konami employee, along with a number of his team, would be seeing their contracts out at the studio and leaving around December of 2015, not long after the release of *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain*. Other rumours have pointed to management reshuffles at Konami, with the possibility that Kojima might be moved into a pure creative role, rather than a management one – but the big money bets are being placed on Kojima walking before the year is out.

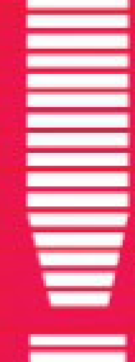
But that baseless speculation doesn't answer the bigger questions we have about Kojima, the man, the myth, the *Metal Gear* developer. With that in mind, games™ approached a few of Kojima's repeat collaborators to get an inside track on what makes one of the most famous game developers in the world tick. His name is big enough to put on the box and see sales increase, sure, but is he worthy of the praise? Is he an auteur? Or is this just a cult of personality driving the worship?

Donna Burke might not have been known to many until around the time the Kojima rumours began, but her name was on the lips of every *Metal Gear* fan after a tweet she posted on April 9 claimed Kojima had been 'fired'. Though she quickly moved to correct her error, the damage had already been done and the rumour mill went into overdrive. "That was not a nice experience," Burke told us, "especially as I was reacting emotionally and tweeting inaccurate information - shit! Lesson learned. I hope.

"I feel bad that I distracted Kojima Productions from working on *The Phantom Pain*," she added. "However, everyone at the studio and Konami who actually know me (despite my slippery Twitter fingers) know I want the best for them and the game, and despite the bumps in the road, the destination is well bloody worth the journey."

"DOES KONAMI HAVE ANYONE IN MIND TO FILL THE SHOES OF ITS BIGGEST NAME?"

Burke, however, remained certain that Kojima is on his way out once *MGSV* is finished – when asked what her reaction was to the claim he was to leave, she told games™: "It wasn't until I got back to Tokyo [after being away at a funeral] that I understood what had happened and how it had happened (details of which I'm not going to go into here), that I felt really upset." After having worked directly with Kojima on both *Ground Zeroes* and *The Phantom Pain* – "Kojima is very friendly and good-humoured, and his staff are also really pleasant," apparently – it's easy to see why Burke would want her link to the *Metal Gear* series to stay in place. »



(NOT) METAL GEAR?!

IT'S EASY TO FORGET KOJIMA IS BEHIND *OTHER* GAMES – HERE'S HIS FIVE MOST NOTABLE PROJECTS

■ SNATCHER (WRITER/DIRECTOR)

The groundbreaking cinematic adventure game might not have been an instant hit outside of Japan, but its cult following speaks for itself. Followed in 1994 with *Policenauts* (unrelated, but a similar style of game), both games show Kojima has a clear flair for doing something other than tactical espionage action. Also that he likes cyberpunk and sci-fi.

■ ZONE OF THE ENDERS (PRODUCER/DESIGNER)

It might have gone down in history as 'the game people bought to get hold of the *MGS2* demo', but *Zone Of The Enders* hasn't quite been forgotten for its actual content. A bit light, a bit short, even a bit dull at times, *ZOE* nonetheless gives a taste for what Kojima can create beyond sneaking and strangling.

■ BOKTAI: THE SUN IS IN YOUR HAND (GAME DESIGNER/PRODUCER)

Being successful helps with your ability to mess about creatively, as proven with *Boktai* on the Game Boy Advance. This otherwise rather forgettable action-RPG featured a sunlight sensor in the cartridge, meaning your character was more powerful when you were physically playing the game outdoors. Oh, Koj, you loon.





■ KABUSHIKI BAIBAI TRAINER KABUTORE! (PRODUCER)

...or *Stock Trading Trainer: Kabutore* in English, this was the last game released under a Konami banner rather than a Kojima Productions one. Even though KojiPro had existed for two years by its 2007 release. Almost as if a stock trading simulator didn't fit in with Kojima's ethos...

■ SILENT HILLS (PRODUCER)

Teased with *P.T.* anticipation for the Kojima/Del Toro collaboration was unprecedented – this was going to re-energise the survival horror genre. It was going to *change* things. And it was going to be brilliant, too. Probably. But now we'll never know, as the collaborative effort was cancelled – and few were more upset than Del Toro himself.





After spending almost 30 years at Konami, though, could this actually be a case of Kojima using the cover of a 'management shake-up' to jump ship? Three decades at one company is a hell of a long time, even if you have been allowed to do pretty much whatever you want for at least half of it. Perhaps Kojima just wanted a new challenge, to break away from the *Metal Gear* series? Admittedly it's a bit hard to swallow that particular theory, as more than half of Kojima's projects have been in the *Metal Gear* franchise – it's clearly something he loves a great deal. But at 51 years of age, he *could* be seeing now as the time to finally do something else in his adult life.

Even though Kojima will survive without *Metal Gear* at his side, there are questions to be asked as to whether the games can get by without the man. The debacle of the original *Metal Gear Rising* – stuck in development hell and masquerading as a watermelon-slicing simulator for so long, before being rescued when Kojima stepped in and handed the reigns to Platinum Games – shows that it is a series in need of a steady hand. But Burke does think this is something that can continue without its creator, as other series have before: "Some might say it's the end, but that denies the reality that Hideo Kojima has created enduring characters and a whole world," she said. "It all lives on in the same way that *Game of Thrones* characters will exist and stories can continue

In his long association with Konami, Hideo Kojima has been responsible for some of the most ground-breaking titles in each generation of hardware. His commitment to graphical quality and story-telling is what has earned him a legion of loyal fans who follow him from franchise to franchise.

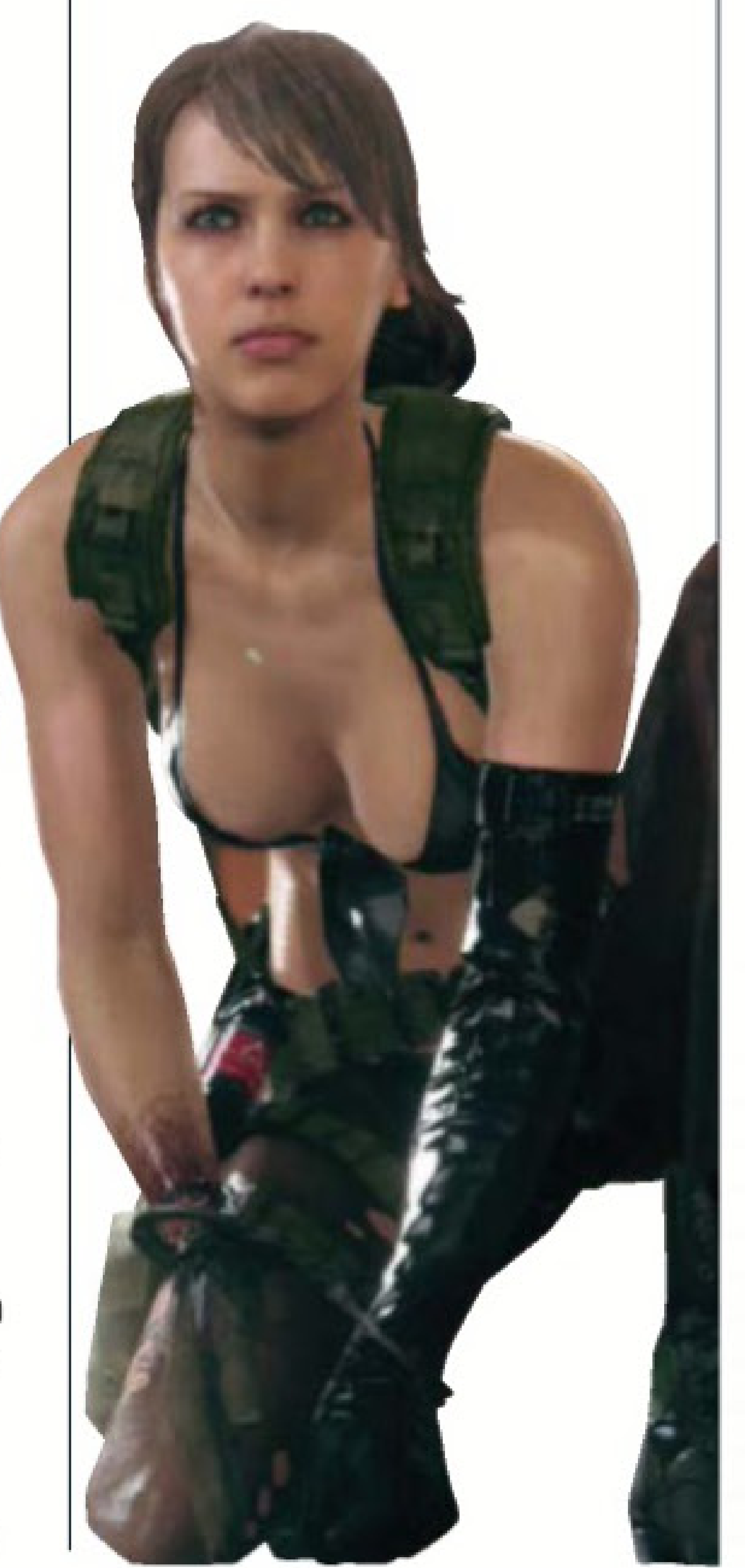
"HIM BEING THE ONE PERSON – CREATIVE AND TECHNICAL – I JUST THINK HE'S BRILLIANT. HE'S A GENIUS"

to be told once George RR Martin stops writing… or in the same way we continue to love the Bond characters despite Ian Fleming not writing the story. Don't we love it when a hot director does a reboot of a movie? Surely that will continue with *MGS*?"

Kris Zimmerman was the English audio director for the *Metal Gear Solid* series since day one – if anyone has a feel for if a series can continue without its creator, she should know. But even when asked that, she told games™ she wasn't sure: "I don't know what – or if – my role will continue," she said. "It just depends on where the pieces lie, I guess. Sometimes, in a situation like this a company starts from scratch. I'd love to be a participant in it, I'd love to continue working with Konami." But even with that in mind, Zimmerman adds another voice to the crowd stating Kojima is, in fact, a special developer: "Him being the one person – creative and technical – I just think he's brilliant," she said. "He's a genius. He's very good at what he does."

The praise didn't stop there – Zimmerman clearly has a lot of respect for Kojima, adding more credence to the argument of the man being an auteur. "I'm fascinated by the intricacy of his plan," she explained. "I'm fascinated by the whole subculture that he created with the Patriots. I'm fascinated that you find out information in *Metal Gear Solid 4* that was hinted at in the original *MGS*, and just how over the years he's woven this together. Also, I'm incredibly fascinated by the historical accuracy of some of the aspects of his games – he does a lot of research, an awful lot. To put that much provision in… he is one smart man. And then to make it entertaining on top of that? It's great."

Part of Kojima's ability to make something so complex while still keeping it entertaining comes down to how open he always appears to be about learning from others. Famously, before the release of *Metal Gear Solid 4*, Kojima collaborated with Ubisoft's *Assassin's Creed* team in a few publicity stunts and the like – but this all actually came about from Kojima approaching the studio fronted by Jade Raymond for advice. "We couldn't believe it," Raymond explained. "He's quite an amazing and inspiring guy, obviously. Everyone knows what he's accomplished and contributed to the games industry. To see that he was a fan of *Assassin's Creed* and he proactively reached out to us… He wanted to discuss our vision and what we'd done and what our jobs were.



"He was like, 'I wanted to do that and I asked my team to do it, and they told me it was impossible, so I want them to come see your team and you show them why it's possible'. Which is quite a huge compliment, but he's very inspiring and it was a huge treat to be able to exchange ideas and best practices with him."

With this spirit of collaboration in mind, it must have been a dream come true for cinephile Kojima to be teamed up with Guillermo Del Toro – one of gaming's true originals with one of cinema's few remaining visionaries. *Silent Hills* was to be their baby together, and the early signs – *P.T.* released without warning during 2014's Gamescom – were fantastic. It's a demo that people *still* play to this day, still finding new things, new secrets, new scares. But that dream collaboration – the kind of thing Kojima had clearly worked his entire career to be a part of – was summarily culled by Konami, surprising everyone, *including* Del Toro.

Speaking in an interview with IGN, Del Toro revealed his disappointment at the Konami cancellation: "Norman [Reedus] was super happy, Hideo was super happy, and so was I," he explained. "I know there's a petition going on the Internet and it's gathering signatures. I would add my signature to it and »



Not many other developers would be able to put themselves into their own game and have people react positively. Kojima has done so many times.

hope that someone pays attention… Hideo and I have been in touch, and he knows he would be the only guy I would follow to the ends of the Earth on anything. I think if anything can be rescued, I will be more than happy." It's difficult to imagine many other game developers inspiring such devotion and respect from a celebrated filmmaker, but that just seems to be a constant in the world of Kojima – he inspires, people like him, creative minds are better off for being around him, but he also courts respect by showing it himself.

This shows from top to bottom in his projects, but Zimmerman offered us a specific example of how her working relationship with Kojima has developed over the years: "In Japan he directs the actors, but he doesn't speak English," she explained. "In the US we have the language barrier – sometimes the way it would be delivered in Japanese is a little different to the way it would be delivered in English, so sometimes we might have a little conflict there. But over the years Kojima has learned to trust me and trust, culture-wise, that I know what I'm talking about and can get the right performance." They might often be referred to as convoluted and overblown, but Kojima is a director that is concise and moderated in his approach to managing other individuals – trusting in them, only stepping in when it needs to be done (take a bow, *Metal Gear Solid: Rising*), offering a creative sounding board for his whole team. His loss could be one of Konami's biggest to date.

Once Kojima is out of the door, though, there are concerns on the side of Konami – does the studio have anyone in mind to fill the shoes of its biggest name? Is there anyone in the studio capable of being the next 'name' to sell titles far and wide across the globe? The studio's announcements since the Kojima rumours began to swell haven't looked like it's even an option – while Konami confirmed it intends to produce a new *Metal Gear* series after the release of *The Phantom Pain*, there hasn't been much about other games. *Silent Hills* was cancelled, the *Pro Evo* series will surely continue unabated, and beyond that? Mobile gaming.

The initial reaction to Konami president Hideki Hayakawa's recent interview, in which he seemed to suggest the company's future was in mobile, might not have been totally warranted – there was confusion about whether he meant Konami would purely make mobile games from this point on, when he actually meant mobile would make up a *bigger* chunk of game development for the studio, with the traditional console games still existing. But, beyond *MGSV* and (we assume) *PES 2016*, Konami has no games in development for major consoles. When looked at with this in mind, Kojima's exit might just make a little bit more sense – he's not a man for microtransaction-fuelled, free-to-play puzzle games knocked up in two weeks and re-released every three months. He's a man who takes a rather obscene amount of time to make every game. A blockbuster creator. A man who doesn't suit mobile.

But it is the direction Konami is headed. "Mobile is where the future of gaming lies," Hayakawa told Nikkei. "With multiplatform games, there's really no point in dividing the market into categories anymore. Mobiles will take on the new role of linking the general public to the gaming world." Konami's brass just doesn't see the point in the 'old' way of doing things – the big spend on the big product for an audience of a few million. Its gaming division actually backs up its main source of income – health clubs, casinos and Pachinko machines – so from a pure business-related perspective, it's easier to see why the studio might want to move beyond the big-name 'superstar developer' approach.

Whether it's the *right* thing to do is another question altogether. Maybe fiscally, but probably not from the perspective of those of us who grew up playing and loving Konami's output. For the house of *Contra* and *Castlevania* to become a peddler of IAPs and cut-down mobile versions of its beloved franchises… well, it makes you think that maybe Kojima and his cohorts will have made the right decision, if they do end up leaving Konami at the end of 2015. Much would be lost by that, but, as Zimmerman told us, it would leave a gap at Konami that's extremely tough to fill: "No one can step into those shoes!

"It can't be the same, because no one's him."

KOJ ON KOJ


WHAT DOES THE MAN HIMSELF THINK – NOT JUST ABOUT HIMSELF, BUT THE WORLD? HERE ARE A FEW CHOICE QUOTES FROM HIS TIME IN THE SPOTLIGHT.

- "[*Metal Gear Solid 4*] is going to be the final one for me and Shinkawa. There are other things that we want to create."
- "I always say, 'This will be my last '*Metal Gear*.'"
- "The human body is supposed to be 70 per cent water. I consider myself 70 per cent film"
- "Game creation keeps on expanding, just like the Universe. That is why I keep making games"
- "My biggest failure is '*Metal Gear*.' It's my biggest failure and my biggest success."
- "As a creator, I always want to betray fans' expectations."
- "I respect Shigeru Miyamoto, so there will be a lot of mushrooms in *Metal Gear Solid 3*. But you cannot eat turtles."
- "We might compare each day's decisions with the work of steering a boat. Our efforts will result in nebulous confusion if we make a wrong move at any point, even if it's only a small tack to the side. We absolutely cannot afford carelessness, lest we risk becoming lost ourselves."
- "I have to have a creative role; otherwise, I simply wouldn't come into work."
- "When a man is hit by Friendly Fire, his blood pressure lowers and his morale sinks. I have been hit by Friendly Fire in my heart. Sighs spill from my body instead of blood."
- "This may sound pretentious, but I don't like being thought of as 'the *Metal Gear* guy.' There's a lot more I can do."





■ This early concept of The Chinese Room's new take on the apocalypse is a great example of its unique vision.



A WORLD OUT OF TIME

WHO KNEW THE END OF THE WORLD COULD BE SO PEACEFUL, SO BEAUTIFUL? WE TOOK A QUIET SOJOURN THROUGH *EVERYBODY'S GONE TO THE RAPTURE*



Another early concept for *Everybody's Gone To The Rapture* shows how it can mix the mundane and magical.

We doubt the CryEngine has ever been used to create anything like this, but The Chinese Room has made a gorgeous world.



"I can always tell what kind of game I'm cooking up next by what I've been reading," says Dan Pinchbeck, studio founder and writer for The Chinese Room, "and before *Everybody's Gone To The Rapture*, I was drinking up everything I could that was 'cosy catastrophe' – even some really weird obscure stuff from the Fifties."

Everybody's Gone To The Rapture is a game about the end of the world, but it's not laden with that same post-human, nuclear veil that games have been focusing on so far, whenever they venture into the genre. Rather, something more mysterious is afoot, toying with the fibres of our reality as we know it.

Everybody's Gone To The Rapture is the cosiest kind of catastrophe. It's left the world intact. It's left this sleepy village all but untouched. There is evidence of life everywhere, yet there are no people, no corpses – there's no physical human presence. And yet, it has some of the most *human* stories we've seen, scratched into the woodwork of the town, embedded in its depths.

"*White August* [John Boland] was one of the books I was reading when [*Rapture*] started to come together," Pinchbeck explains. "*White August* is a really odd celebration of nuclear bombs: near the end, the enemy just gets obliterated and everyone's like, 'Hooray for nukes!' [laughs]. That was written in 1955, but then five years later, the books all start to get darker – *On The Beach* comes out, and the attitude around nuclear weapons changes to, 'Oh no, no no no'. So our focusing on the 'cosy catastrophe' was very intentional. We wanted to capture *The Day of the Triffids, A Wrinkle In The Skin, The Death Of Grass*… that was what we wanted to do."

This focus on 'cosy catastrophe' goes hand-in-hand with *Everybody's Gone To The Rapture*'s uniquely British setting. The general theme saw a population wiped out, the central cast of characters the only survivors, now freed from the constraints of a tainted culture that once suppressed them. The genre was dystopic, preoccupied with the flaws in the human condition, keen to make monsters out of men. Yet, The Chinese Room's first console game doesn't seem to have the same hang-ups – no, this game is celebratory of the indomitable nature of the human spirit.

"[*Rapture*] was also a reaction to the apocalyptic games we'd been playing – you know, you're playing as this hero, this square-jawed, chiselled saviour of people," explains Jessica Curry, The Chinese Room's other studio head and composer for the studio. "Dan said, 'If this was you and me, we would not be *this* person.' So we explored that – this idea that there aren't heroes, there are just *people*. That's the game I wanted to make; far more nuanced and understated."

"That idea of domestic catastrophe was *terrifying* to me," continues Pinchbeck. "If you see the world blowing up and thunderous clouds stream over everything, you've got no stake in that. But, in *Threads*, for example, you've got all these people cowering outside Woolworths – something we all know – and then you see some milk bottles just melt from a nuclear blast. *That* puts disaster in terms you can understand."

This isn't the first (or the last) time Pinchbeck brings up *Threads* in this interview – released in 1984, it was a TV show that had clearly impacted himself and Curry. Earlier in our demo with the game, Curry explained how every new recruit to The Chinese Room team was made to watch *Threads* when they joined, and Pinchbeck jovially relayed how 'traumatised' it had made them.

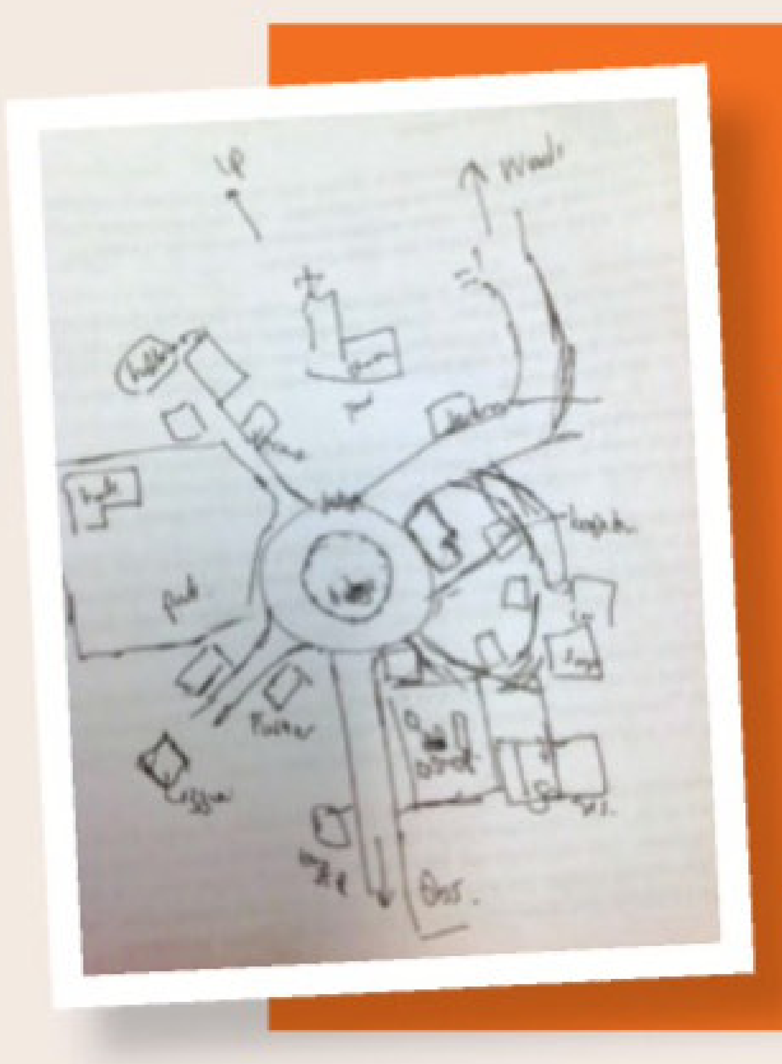
When you compare *Rapture* to it's thematically-linked genre rivals – *Fallout, S.T.A.L.K.E.R., Metro 2033, Shin Megami Tensei* – it's immediately clear that The Chinese Room's focus on the 'cosy' aspects of the apocalypse allow it to paint character portraits in a whole new way. *Fallout* – the closest in the aforementioned list in terms of character development – had very functional characters; each NPC existed to fulfil a role, to act as a vessel for some greater quest line.

> "THERE AREN'T HEROES, THERE ARE JUST PEOPLE. THAT'S THE GAME I WANTED TO MAKE"

No-one in *Rapture* is like that; rather, all of Pinchbeck's characters exist *only* to be listened to, to be experienced. Like The Chinese Room's breakout, cult hit *Dear Esther*, *Rapture* is about uncovering a mystery. There aren't any people present, though – not physically. Instead, swirling orbs of light denote life – whether it was supposed to be past or present – and it's your choice of who you uncover and listen to first. We initially thought that in removing any emphatic human anchoring points from the game, we'd feel alienated, but the opposite was true – we actually began to project images onto these fully fleshed-out people instead.

"Initially it was a happy accident, [not having avatars], because the moment you get into character art and character animation, you're taking on a *huge* amount of work, and you start really risking the uncanny valley in a big way," Pinchbeck reveals. "Characters can be really well done, but if they don't 'sit' properly… it's a whole new area we haven't worked in before, and it's such a specialist thing to get into.

"But we were also thinking about novelisations of movies and things like that – you go to the cinema, you see the film of a book you've read, and you think, 'Well, that's not how he/she looked in »



ON ENGLAND'S GREEN AND PLEASANT LAND

Until *Everybody's Gone To The Rapture*, we'd never played a game set in Middle England. Seeing the red-circled road signs, the orange traffic cones, the word 'SLOW' painted on the roads… it immediately gave us a stake in the sleepy town of Yaughton.

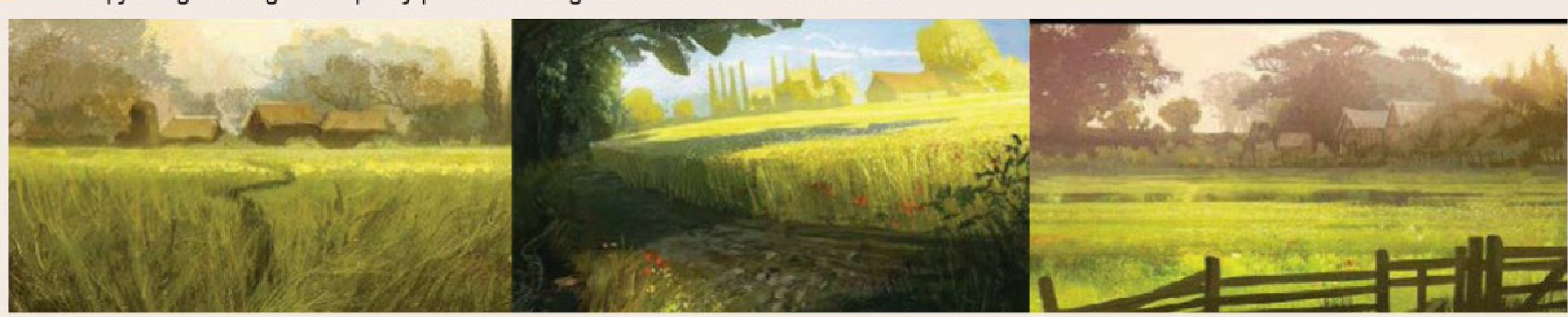
"We talked about the idea of authenticity a lot, and we weren't having those discussions so we could have authenticity *just* for the sake of authenticity – we were doing it to make you care," explains Pinchbeck. "If you believe in the space, you care about what happens in the space. Because the characters are represented quite abstractly, if you at least get to know their homes and the areas they inhabit, it makes their arcs really matter."

"That's true," continues Curry, "although, I'm looking forward to the day when I can go out and take a walk without thinking ,'Oh wow, that would be really good for [*Rapture*]'. It really does start to make you go slightly insane; you just can't enjoy any green space!"

"It's like *The Matrix*," Pinchbeck laughs. "You just start doing polygon counts of *everything*."



The sleepy village setting seems pretty peaceful for a game set after the end of the world.



my head'. That wrecks things. We wanted to get past that; we want people to know what Steven looks like, or what Kate looks like [in our game], and we want them to assemble their own characters. [*Rapture*] speaks to the absence of people, but it also gives you the freedom to make the characters your own."

"When we were doing the voice recordings, the actors were quite heightened in their performances," Curry expands, "but we kept bringing it down, down, down, until it ended up really naturalistic – there's no 'soap acting' in it at all, you know? I like to think of [*Rapture*] as a radio play, almost. Dan always says you can play it without the visuals and the story would still totally make sense, between the music and the voice acting."

Curry is completely correct, although the visuals (rendered with CryEngine's photorealistic tech) give the game a wonderful sheen. Curry's music reminded us quite a lot of neoclassical German composer Max Richter, a musician known for his cinematic scores and subtle motifs. When that's paired with the game's peaceful, late-summer setting, the combined experience is reminiscent of the most naturalistic Mike Leigh scenes, except you're the one in charge of the cinematography. You're the third part of that famous filmic combination: the acting and music are taken care of – you're the vessel, the eyes, the lens.

"We're handing over a lot of control to the player to say, 'This is your story', you know?" Pinchbeck continues, earnestly. "That moves outside of just letting them choose how they explore the game; it goes right down to you forming an opinion on what the characters look like, deciding how their relationships develop. I think that helps make [*Rapture*] more *your* story than ours."

"You're a voyeur, essentially." Curry punctuates.

You're the fly on the wall, observing the end of the world, and all you can do is watch. You never feel intrusive, because no one knows you're there. You never feel odd for walking into someone's house – rather, it feels like you *have* to be here.

"One of the things we've gone backwards and forwards on, that's had the most design iterations, has been the extent to which we're signposting and the extent to which we're letting the player free-roam. Trying to find that right balance is *so* hard," Pinchbeck explains as we wander into a church, in-game. We've followed one of those floating orange anomalies inside here, but that's the only sense of direction the game has. You're free to go wherever you want, straight off the bat.

"I'm really into walking as a kind of psycho-geographical thing, exploring those spaces you create for yourself as you walk," Curry continues. "I read a piece recently about getting lost, and how we're never lost anymore because we have our phones, and we've lost something of ourselves because of that. It's a really interesting psychic space to be in, getting lost, because you've got to find your way back somewhere. Even if you are lost in this game, it should force you to slow down. I'd rather the player got lost to have some time to think and dream than patronise them with this really overt sign-posting and such.

"Hopefully with the music supporting the player as they wander, everything will fall into place as much as it needs to for that kind of experience. But it certainly will frustrate some people. [Laughter.]"

Everybody's Gone To The Rapture is a game unlike any other we've had the pleasure of playing on the PS4 to date. It is a game that deconstructs what games are – it's more concerned with the evolution of interactive narrative than it is with mechanics. So many games are so preoccupied with making you fight, making you kill, making you run… it's nice to find a game that gives us the chance, as Curry puts it, to dream.

BLITZ SPIRIT

Set in 1984 – a not-very-subtle nod to the game's literary inspiration – *Rapture* aims to capture the culture of a society before we became connected with wireless technology. "We wanted to capture that belligerent Blitz spirit," explains Pinchbeck. "We've got a pensioner in the game, and we wanted to show that typical British spirit. The world is about to end, you *are* about to die, and yet you're fine, putting a brave face on things, saying, 'Yes, everything's going to be okay, but I'm *so mad* that the shop is closed.' [laughs] You know, if it was my gran in this situation, she wouldn't care that nuclear dust was falling onto the Earth – she'd have been annoyed it was staining her washing. But that kind of shows the level of the tragedy." Curry continues, "In a way, at that level, that's all you can care about, because you've got no way of understanding the magnitude of the event that's happened. If your marriage is failing, your marriage is failing even if you've only got 24 hours to live. They were the stories that were more interesting."



"IT'S MORE CONCERNED WITH THE EVOLUTION OF INTERACTIVE NARRATIVE THAN MECHANICS"



WHY I ❤...

RESIDENT EVIL 4

ROB MACKENZIE, DESIGNER, BOSSA STUDIO

"There's always one game that I come back to and that's Resident Evil 4 *for me. I probably don't need to champion that because Capcom seems pretty consistent in releasing that on every single device once a year. But this comes up a lot and I think someone asked recently what was the last game that felt like you had played something special, like the time you played Zelda and everyone went 'Woah, this is a weird open world'. The last time I had that feeling was* Resident Evil 4. *It looked amazing and it seemed to go on forever. It gave me what I thought of at the time as a pretty cinematic experience and what I thought were great controls before we all learned that we could move while shooting. It takes a lot to stop me from talking about how much I love* Resident Evil 4 *and I play it once a year."*



"It takes a lot to stop me from talking about how much I love Resident Evil 4 – I play it once a year"

ROB MACKENZIE, DESIGNER, BOSSA STUDIO



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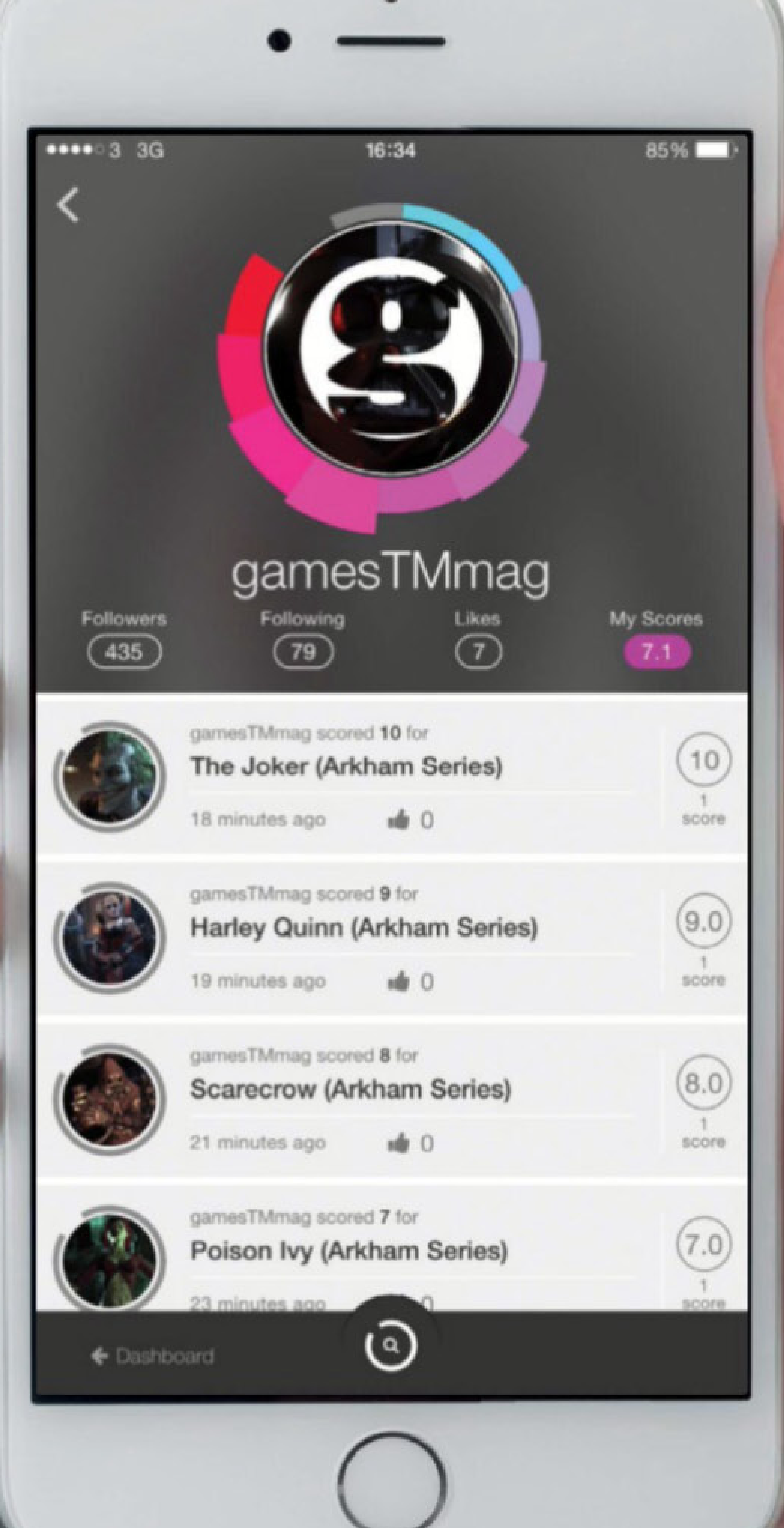




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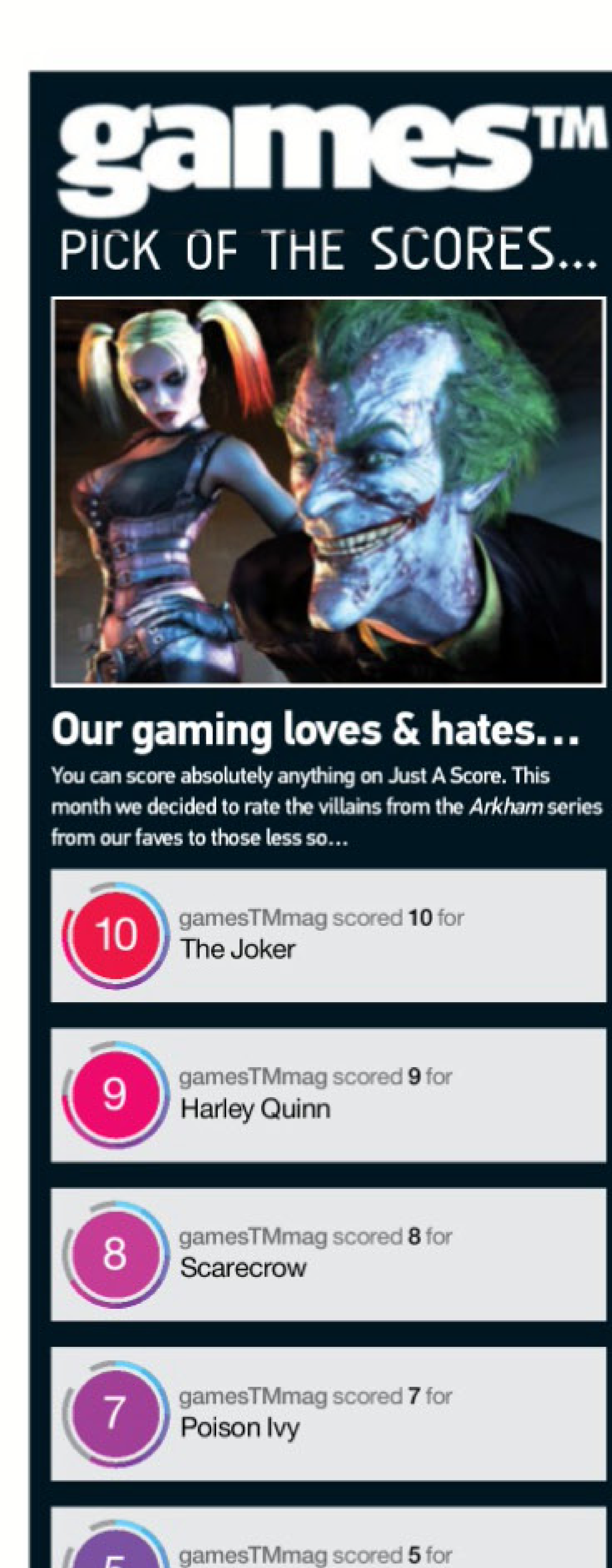
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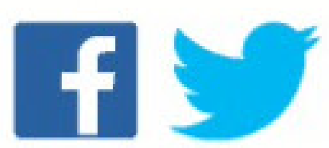


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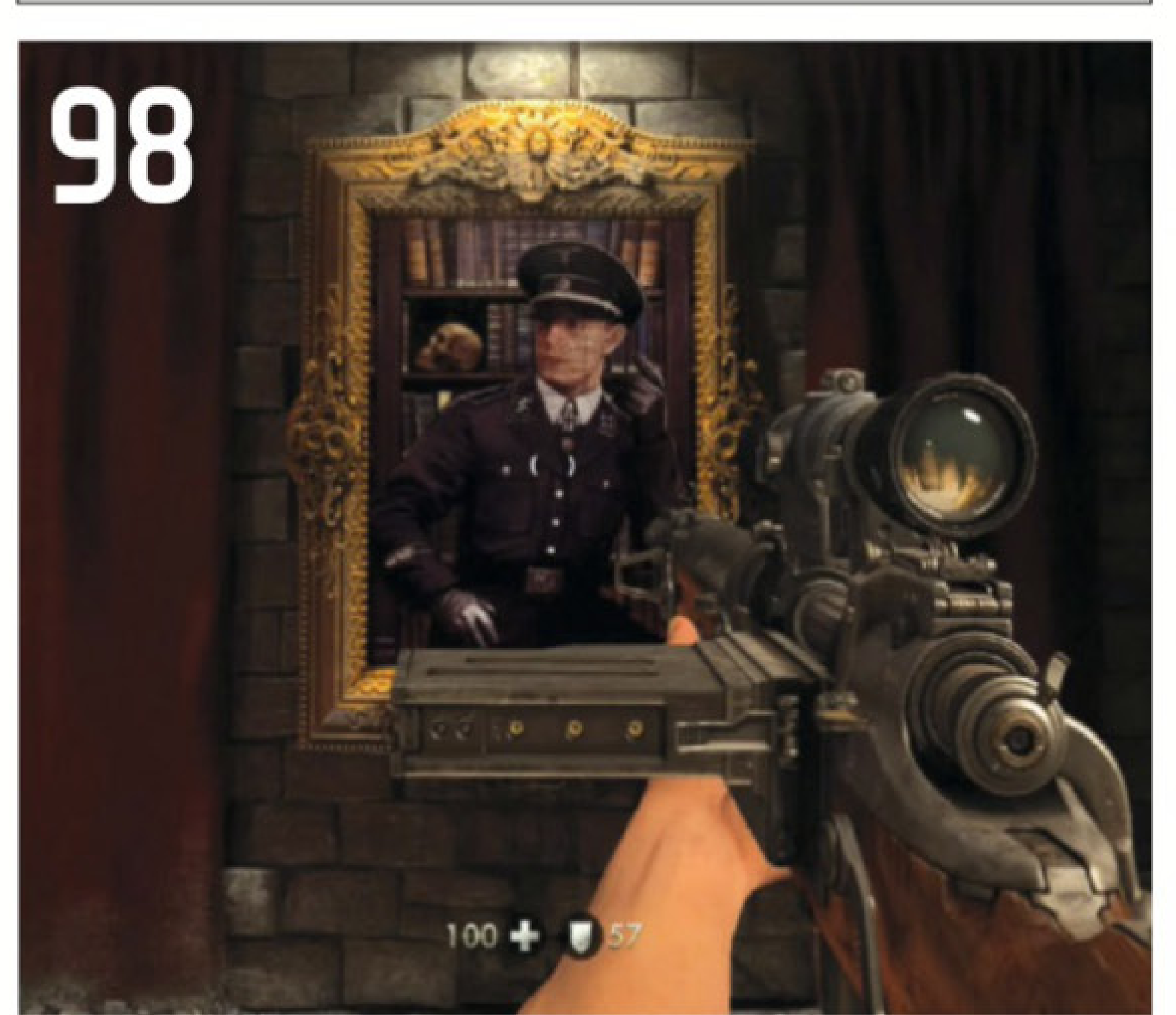
THE WITCHER III WILD HUNT

Did CD Projekt live up to the hype and deliver the genre-defining game of this generation of consoleS? We give our verdict

THE AVERAGE

Three of the numbers in a ten-point scale are of greater importance than the others: five, seven, and of course, ten. Some publications would fool you into believing that a 7/10 game is average, but that just doesn't make sense to us. **games™** reviews videogames on their entertainment value, and so any title that simply performs to an adequate standard will receive a 5/10. Simple. The elusive ten is reserved for games of incredible, irrefutable quality, but please be aware that a score of ten in no way professes to mean perfection. Perfection is an unattainable goal, and on a ten-point scale nothing should be unattainable. Again, simple. Our reviews are not a checklist of technical features with points knocked off for flaws, neither are they a PR-pressured fluff-fest – we'd never let that happen, and besides you'd smell it a mile off. And finally, the reviews you find within these pages are most certainly not statements of fact, they are the opinions of schooled, knowledgeable videogame journalists, designed to enlighten, inform, and engage. The gospel according to **games™**.

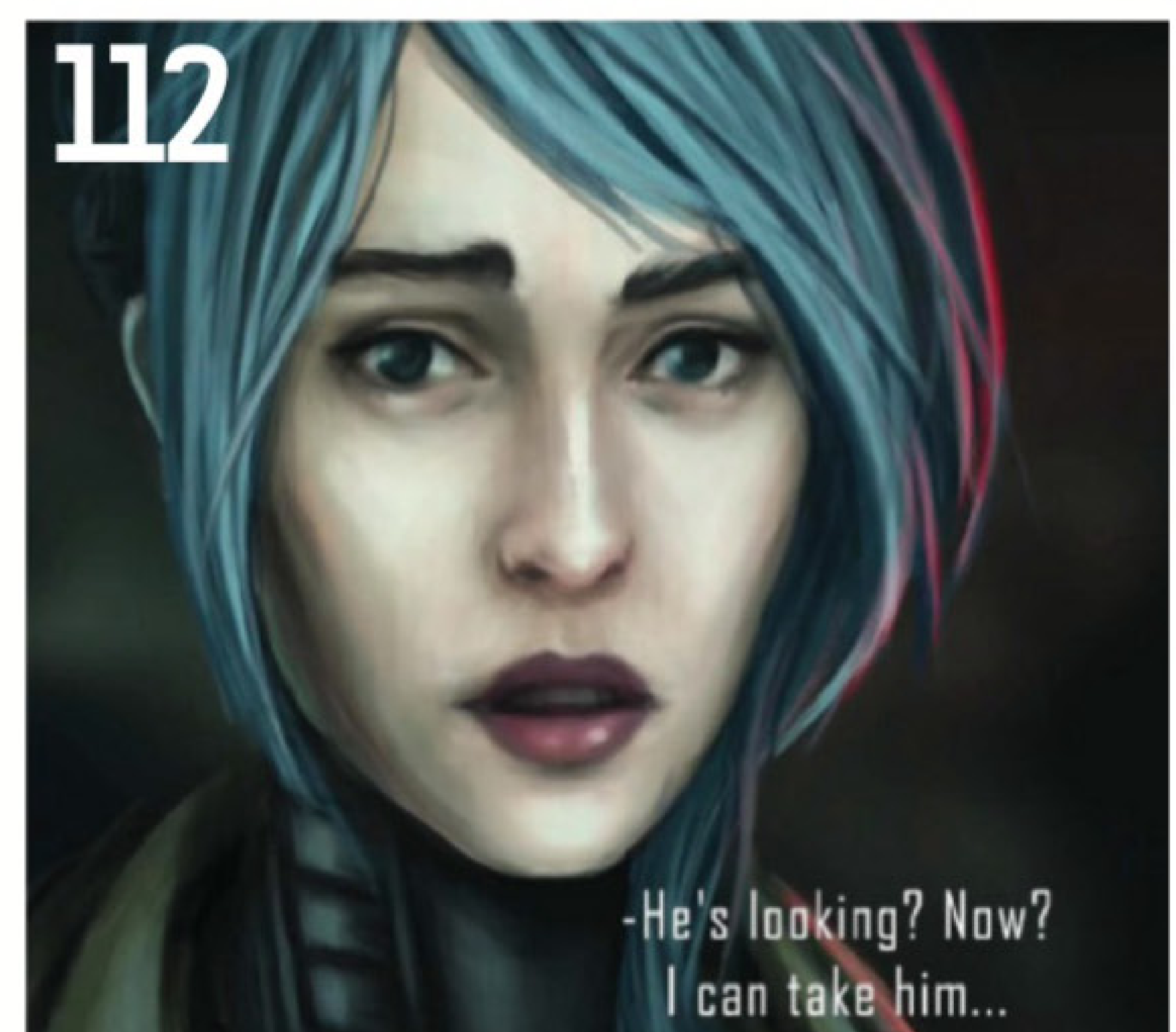












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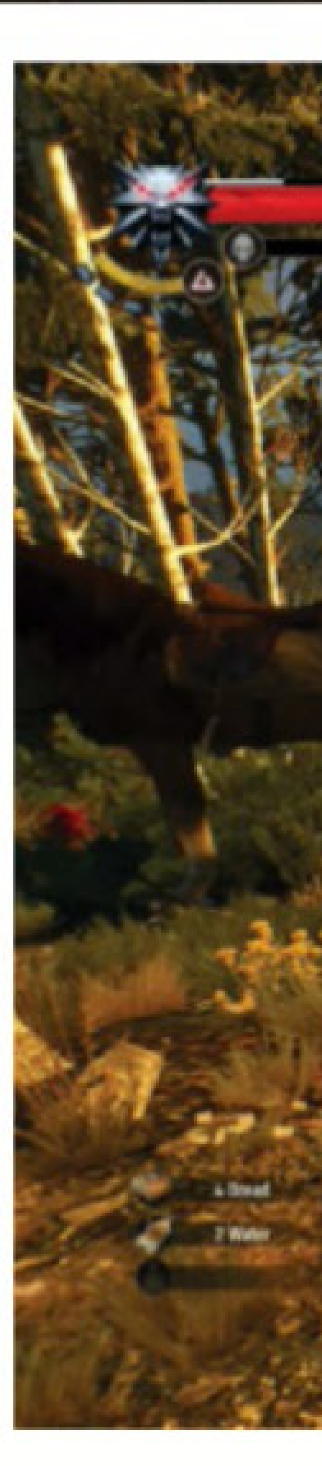

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TO SAY WE ARE IMPRESSED BY THE SCALE OF THE WITCHER 3 DOESN'T QUITE CAPTURE WHAT IT IS THAT MAKES IT SO BRILLIANT

THE PEOPLE'S DEVELOPER

You could argue that it's just a bit of clever PR, but there's no denying the crowd-pleasing nature of CD Projekt Red's approach to post-release support for *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*. While the developer will be releasing paid-for expansions in the future, it is also dishing out 16 free pieces of DLC to anyone who buys the game. This includes the likes of the Temerian Armour Set and, our personal favourite so far, the Beard and Hairstyle Set. "Right after release, lots of tiny pieces of tempting content materialize with a steep price tag attached," says CD Projekt Red co-founder Marcin Iwinski, talking about the tendency to charge for small pieces of DLC. "We strongly believe this is not the way it should work," he continues, "and, with *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, we have decided to do it differently."





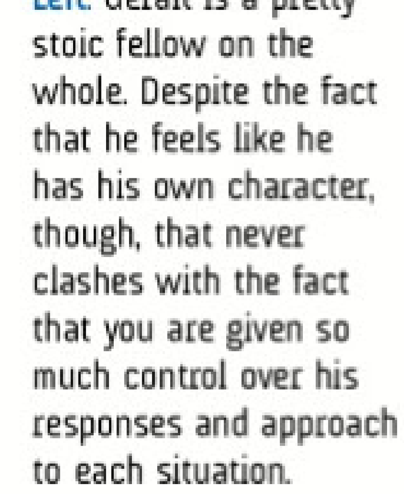


GERALT THE AWARDS

The Witcher III: Wild Hunt

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox One, PC
ORIGIN: Poland
PUBLISHER: Bandai Namco
DEVELOPER: CD Projekt Red
PRICE: £44.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



Left: Geralt is a pretty stoic fellow on the whole. Despite the fact that he feels like he has his own character, though, that never clashes with the fact that you are given so much control over his responses and approach to each situation.

***The Witcher 3* surprised us.** Sure, we had been primed to expect to find ourselves let loose in a gargantuan open world, but we can't be the only ones who, calloused by the characteristic bombast of triple-A marketing, were at least a little cynical about how the fantasy we were being sold ahead of release would look in reality. As it turns out, the game is startlingly close to being everything CD Projekt Red claimed it would be.

That's most obvious when it comes to the game's sheer scale. Travelling through thick forests and open plains, small villages and huge cities, you gradually begin to appreciate how staggeringly colossal *Wild Hunt*'s world is. To say we are impressed by the scale of *The Witcher 3* doesn't quite capture what it is that makes it so brilliant, however. The fact that a game is big does not in and of itself make it compelling. The trick is to leverage that scale in such a way that it impacts on your relationship with the world that you're exploring in a meaningful way – that is what *Wild Hunt* achieves and that is what makes it such a fantastic game.

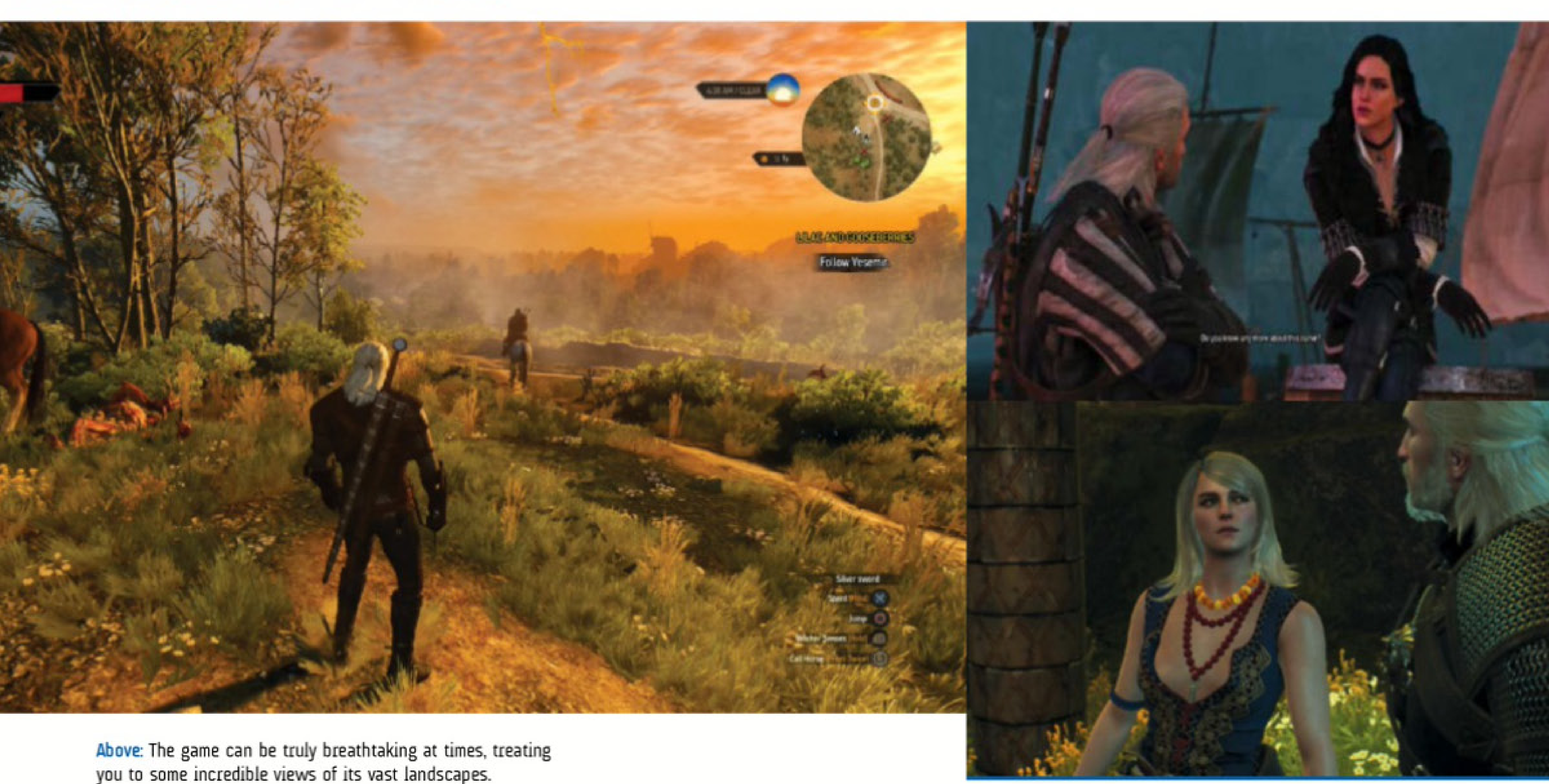
Take the game's mission design, an aspect in which it is quite different to its open-world peers. Think of how often in other open-world games you have, for example, undertaken a mission where you have to race somebody. Upon completion of that mission, you are informed that there are now are number of other race missions unlocked on the map for you to complete. Those games will continue to follow that tedious pattern, introducing you to a handful of templated mission types for you to repeat ad nauseum. The effect of that? You feel as if you are being presented with 'content' to 'consume', content that feels extrinsic to the world in which it is housed.

Wild Hunt does the opposite. Everything you find within its world, everything that you are tasked to do, feels unique by virtue of the fact that there is always a carefully

ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

STREAMLINED: This is a far more polished experience than the previous iteration, *The Witcher 2*, in almost every aspect, with combat in particular noticeably tightened up.



Above: The game can be truly breathtaking at times, treating you to some incredible views of its vast landscapes.

Left: There are some great female characters in *The Witcher 3*, though we do question whether it's really necessary that *all* of them seem intent on displaying their cleavage, particularly as a lot of them spend a fair amount of time in battle.



crafted story attached. Its quests are intimately related to places and people – traumatic events that took place in the past, struggles in the present, myths, political turmoil and so on. Each one teaches you something about the world and its inhabitants, as opposed to being a piece of content that's only there to give you something to do. By taking that approach, the game skilfully creates a strong connection with its sprawling fantasy world. You are left with the impression that there are things going on in those areas you are yet to visit on that gigantic map, things that you want to discover, not for the gold, or the XP, but for the stories you might find. You are invigorated by the idea that this is a living, breathing space that would continue to exist whether or not you are there to see it.

Indeed, things *will* occasionally happen because you are not there to intervene. *The Witcher 3* prides itself on offering you the choice to respond to situations as you please and take different paths to achieving your goals, but occasionally, the choice to quite simply not engage at all is also viable and will have consequences of its own. Again, *The Witcher* uses this openness in an intelligent way. In contrast to other games with a strong focus on choice, it often refrains from telegraphing the consequences of your actions, or even the fact that a particular action *will* have a consequence, allowing it to be far more nuanced and surprising than it otherwise would be.

Still, the game is not perfect in that regard. Sometimes it can fall into the trap of assuming that taking a 'shades of grey' approach is necessarily sophisticated. We think in particular of a serial domestic abuser that plays a key role in the story and whom you can respond to in a variety of ways. That the game wants to paint him as a rounded character is understandable – desirable, even – but in doing that, it strays dangerously close to presenting his actions in a sympathetic light by virtue of its fear of appearing simplistically moralist. Thankfully, that's a rare misstep in a game that is usually far more intelligent in the way it handles its characters and the way that it situates them within its dark, brutal and unjust world.

Speaking of that brutal world, it's worth noting that – in combination with the game's size – it plays perfectly into the fantasy of who protagonist Geralt is and what he does. When travelling from place to place, you get a real sense that you are in a vast unforgiving wilderness populated by violent and dangerous creatures. The idea that, as a Witcher, though often derided, you are needed for your skill in tracking down and slaying said creatures makes perfect sense.

Wild Hunt further plays into that fantasy through the way it structures its combat, particularly when it comes to taking down the powerful monsters attached to Witcher contracts. The game tasks you with talking to witnesses or investigating the scenes of previous attacks using Witcher senses that highlight significant objects, tracks, bloodstains and so on, in order to learn about a creature's weaknesses. Using that knowledge you can craft oils to apply to your

FAQs

Q. WHAT'S THE STORY?

Geralt is trying to track down his adopted daughter Ciri, before the legendary and dangerous Wild Hunt gets to her.

Q. IS PRIOR KNOWLEDGE NEEDED?

You don't have to have played previous *Witcher* games to enjoy this one, but there will be a few references lost on you.

Q HOW DOES IT HANDLE?

Wild Hunt controls brilliantly on the whole, but it can be annoyingly finicky on a small scale -when trying to pick up a particular item, for example.



Right: A number of flashback scenes see you take control of Ciri to give you context on what's been happening to her. These sections are relatively short and linear. Ciri has unique abilities in combat built around her ability to teleport.

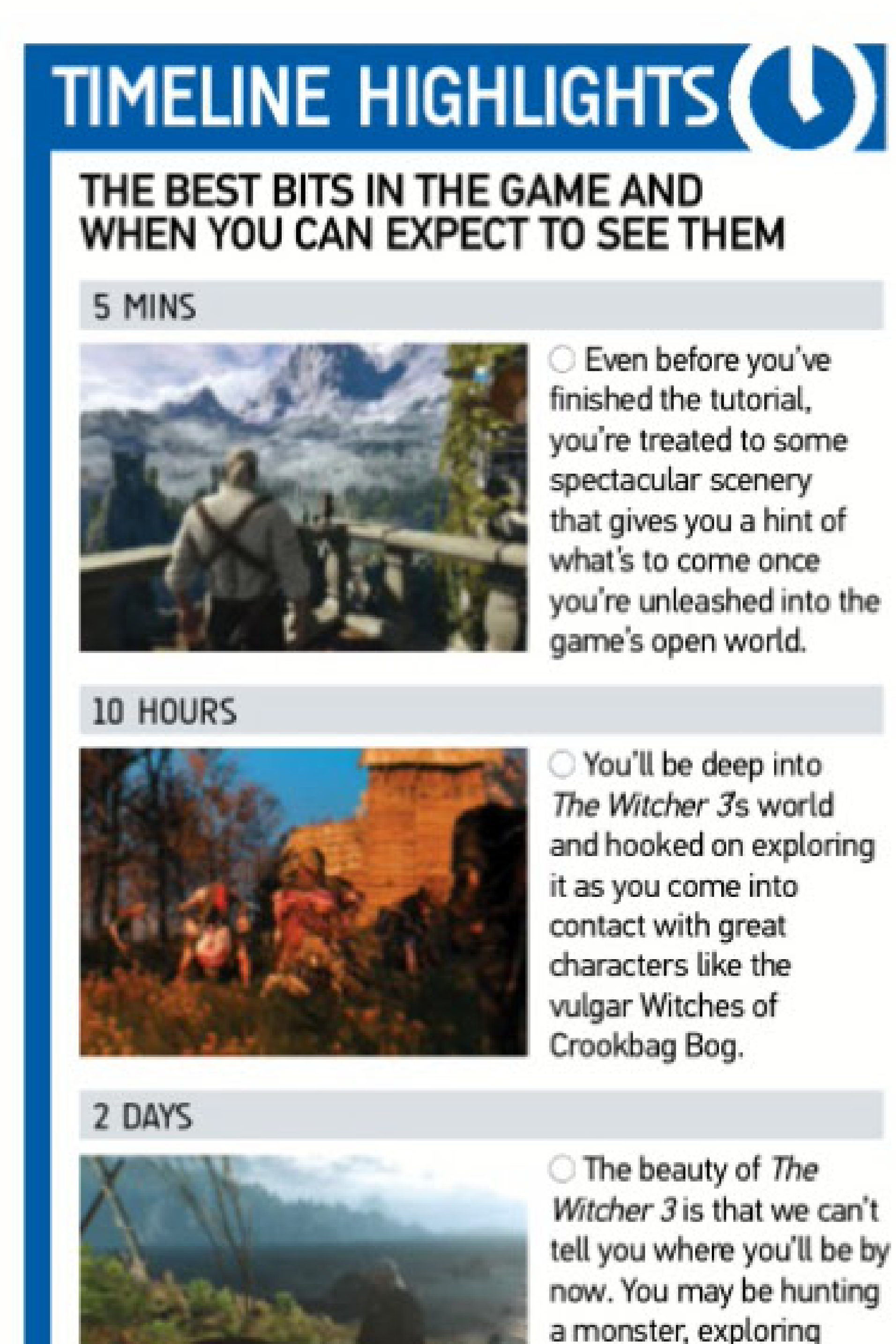


Right: There are some pretty gruesome monsters for you to contend with throughout *The Witcher*'s world.

IN THIS GAME, YOU MUST RESPECT YOUR ENEMIES IN A WAY THAT YOU DON'T HAVE TO IN TITLES THAT HAVE TAKEN A MORE AUTOMATED APPROACH

Below: Geralt will finish some enemies with execution style finishers – quite dramatic when set against that beautiful sunset, we think you'll agree.





TIMELINE HIGHLIGHTS

THE BEST BITS IN THE GAME AND WHEN YOU CAN EXPECT TO SEE THEM

5 MINS

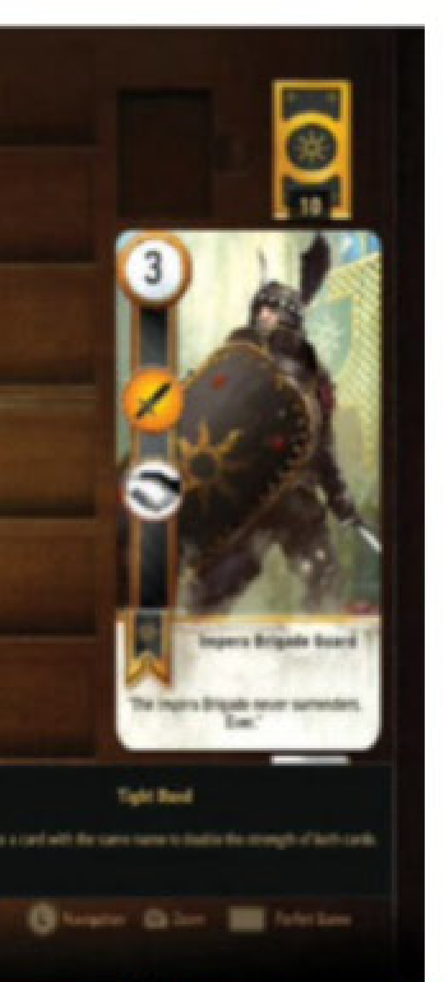
Even before you've finished the tutorial, you're treated to some spectacular scenery that gives you a hint of what's to come once you're unleashed into the game's open world.

10 HOURS

You'll be deep into *The Witcher 3*'s world and hooked on exploring it as you come into contact with great characters like the vulgar Witches of Crookbag Bog.

2 DAYS

The beauty of *The Witcher 3* is that we can't tell you where you'll be by now. You may be hunting a monster, exploring Novigrad, or enjoying any other of the myriad possibilities on offer.



A BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO GWENT

Wild Hunt has its very own card game called Gwent. Here are some key tips to take you to victory.

BUILD YOUR DECK: It won't be long before you start to struggle to beat Gwent players, so pick up new cards when you can. You can get cards from completing quests, but merchants sell them too. Pick up a few from the landlady at the pub near Woesong Bridge.

USE YOUR ABILITIES: It's easy to neglect the fact that your faction and leader card come with special abilities attached, but you should be mindful of how they should influence your strategy.

CHECK THE WEATHER: Don't underestimate the importance of weather cards, which can be used to reduce the stats of all cards in a row to 1 (except for hero cards). You can change the course of a game by playing that one card.

sword to enhance damage, or make bombs to which a particular creature is weak before finally tracking down and confronting it. That process of investigation, preparation and confrontation is satisfying in itself, but also has the effect of playing up the importance of every encounter and making you feel like the job of a Witcher is as specialised as the game tells you it is.

Alongside those RPG-tinged combat element, *Wild Hunt* also proves itself to be more than capable as an action game. Light and strong attacks, dodges, rolls, magic, blocks and ripostes that leave enemies open to counter attacks are all part of your repertoire and using them can be incredibly satisfying. Arguably, things can get a little messy when you're fighting a large number of enemies, but that encourages a cautious approach that can be rewarding once you're accustomed to it. It's a matter of acknowledging that you must respect your enemies in a way that you don't have to in titles that have taken a more automated approach modelled on the *Batman: Arkham* system of combat. It's indicative of *The Witcher 3*'s desire to give you as much agency as possible and to make it feel like everything you do matters.

SYNTHESIS

BRINGING GENRES TOGETHER

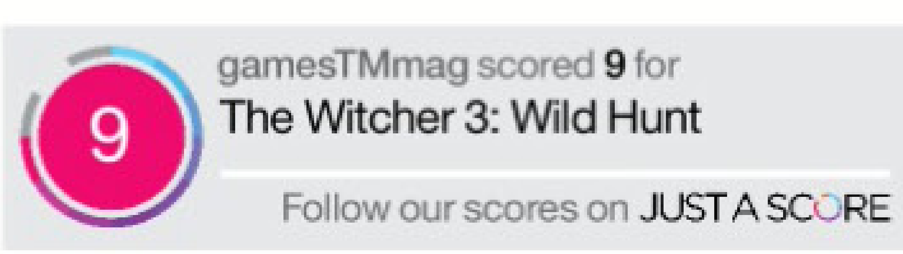
MASTER SWORDSMAN: *Wild Hunt* does an excellent job of blending its RPG-focused elements – equipment upgrades, crafting bombs, using potions and so on – with a great action-combat system.

Given that *The Witcher* is so accomplished in almost every aspect, what a shame it is that it can be let down by technical deficiencies. We could forgive the couple of hard crashes we experienced during our substantial time with the game, but problems with the frame rate are much harder to ignore. It's not that we're obsessive about frame rate as a general rule, but it is so inconsistent here that it is frequently distracting. In fairness, that aspect of the game did improve with its launch day patch, and CD Projekt Red has promised that more are coming. Given that it is a studio that's been praised for its post-release support in the past, it's reasonable to be hopeful that things will get even better as time progresses.

Let's sweep those relatively minor technical issues aside, though, because it seems almost churlish to even mention them when you're confronted with a game as fantastically accomplished as this. *Wild Hunt* is a masterpiece of open-world design in which it feels like every last detail has had the same level of care, thought and attention paid to by the team that created the game. It is fascinating to explore, consistently rewarding, always engaging and cements CD Projekt Red's reputation as a studio to watch.

VERDICT





SHAKING UP THE GRID

Project CARS

It's common knowledge that racing simulators are not easy, or cheap, to design and produce. Simply getting the physics modelling as close to perfect as possible takes multiple experts working many hours, let alone the effort that needs to go into visuals, sound, artificial intelligence and online components. For that reason, the genre's biggest and most successful players are *Gran Turismo* and *Forza Motorsport* – games backed by the money of Sony and Microsoft, respectively.

Taking into account such financial pressures, this is not a genre that's at all straightforward to penetrate on a mass scale. Slightly Mad Studios, however, has a bit of an advantage in that it's an expert in the racing genre – having developed *Need for Speed: Shift*, *Test Drive* and others – so it already has a core understanding and set of technologies at its disposal. It also helps that it managed to garner much of the development funds for *Project Cars* through a hugely successful crowd-funding campaign, ridding them of the need to yield to a publisher's whims.

The result is a racing simulator aimed at the mass market, but in a way that is most unlike the aforementioned competition. So many of the traditional rules governing this genre have been broken that it wouldn't be entirely remiss to say that *Project Cars* is more an example of racing game evolution than simple continuation. For each element it shares with *Forza* and *Gran Turismo*, it brings something that is entirely new.

Most obviously and dramatically, it's the way that the single player career is structured that sets this apart. Without a cash reward system or experience point bar in sight, the idea of 'levelling up' in order to unlock new cars and events is a thing of the past. Almost everything is open from the get go, progression coming from completing seasons racing for a given team in a given vehicle category and division.

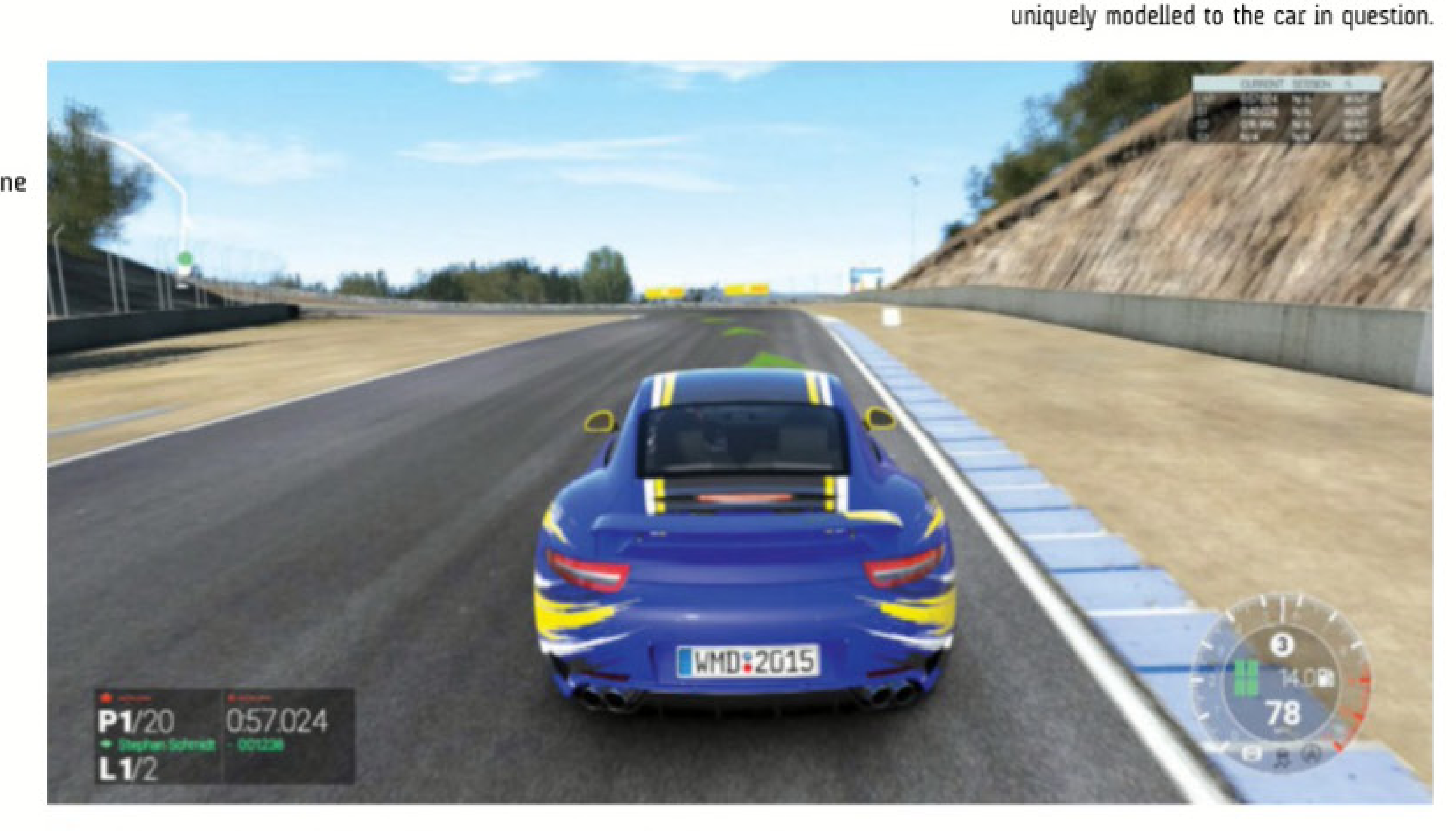
One season, you might choose to race go-karts for a small start-up operation, only to find that, five or six seasons later, your stock has risen and you're now being head-hunted by the biggest names in Touring Cars and beyond. You're under no obligation to change teams or compete in a certain event, though. If you like, you can opt to jump straight into a Le Mans car and stay in it for your entire career – winning and defending championships in a bid to be recognised as the best driver the sport has ever seen.

For those that want more career direction there are three incredibly lofty goals to aim for, which you can target individually or, for the truly ambitious, tackle as a collective. The longest and most gruelling of these is 'Zero to Hero', the task being to work your way up from the karting ranks to the heights of the Le Mans series (and win it). Another, 'Defending Champ', challenges you to retain

DETAILS

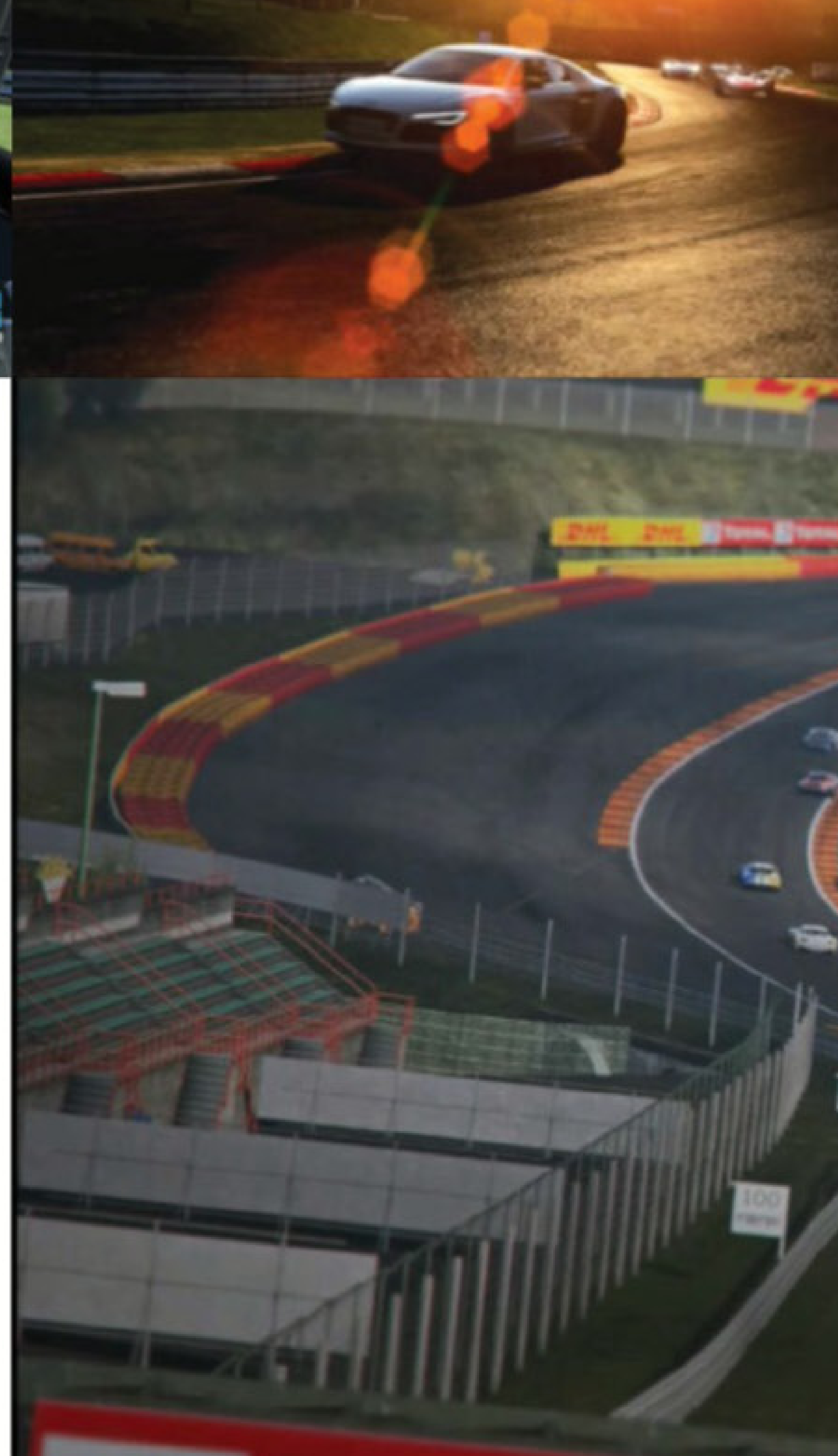
FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: PC, Xbox One
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Slightly Mad Studios
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £44.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-16
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

Right: The cockpit camera options are claustrophobic in a way that makes you feel like you're part of the car itself, helped by the fact that each and every one is uniquely modelled to the car in question.



Above: If you're not comfortable with interior viewpoints then the 'traditional' chase cam is an option, although that sense of speed is reduced.





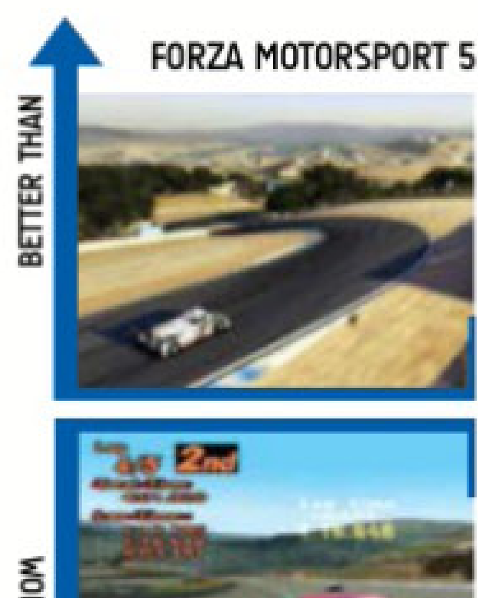
Right: From Spa to Laguna Seca, from Silverstone to Imola, there's a huge catalogue of real world tracks to choose from.

PROJECT CARS IS MORE AN EXAMPLE OF RACING GAME EVOLUTION THAN SIMPLE CONTINUATION



BETTER THAN

FORZA MOTORSPORT 5





WORSE THAN

GRAN TURISMO 2

FAQs

Q. RACING WHEEL REQUIRED?
No, but we highly recommend it. The handling model benefits from the extra control.

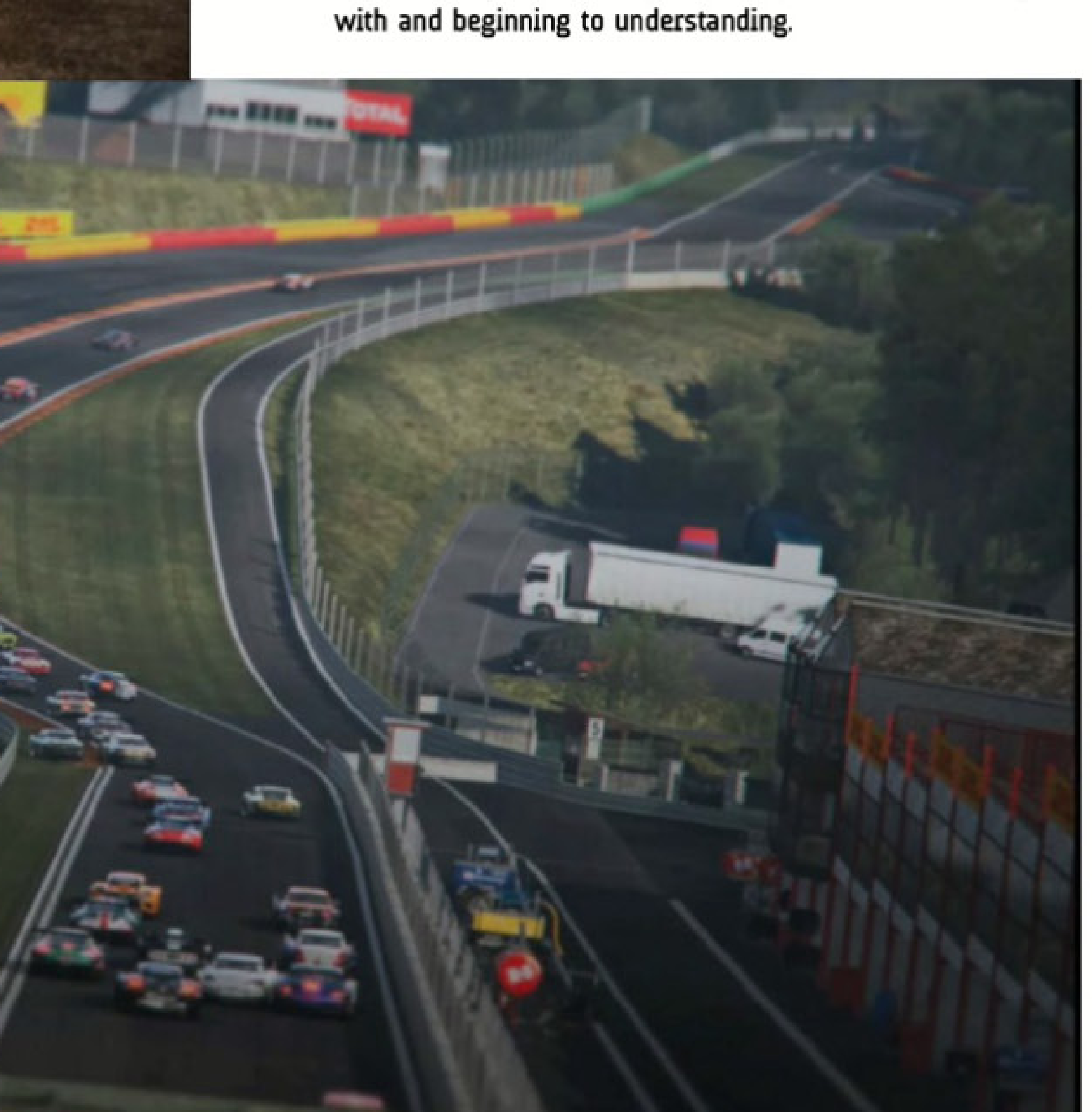
Q. A GAME FOR THE LONG TERM?
Very much so. The career mode is exhaustive and the online options give you a reason to play daily.

Q. BETTER WITH VR?
Upon their release, both Project Morpheus and Oculus Rift will be supported. We've played using Oculus and it's very impressive.

MASTERING THE BEASTS

If you harbour dreams of driving and understanding the complexities of each of *Project Cars*' vehicles then there are two things that you need: adaptability and patience. Driving a go-kart bears little resemblance to thrashing a touring car around the track. Similarly, a hugely powerful Le Mans car is not comparable with a BMW M3.

Taking the time to develop the skills required to tame each of these categories provides a large part of *Project Cars*' charm and, certainly, is where much of the long-term appeal of single player is derived. Our recommendation is not to try your luck online with any vehicle that you haven't spent a couple of hours training with and beginning to understanding.



your championship for three consecutive years in one of the top-tier tournaments, while 'Triple Crown' focuses on variety by asking you to win titles in three different car divisions.

Alternatively, you can ignore them all and drive whichever cars you want in the tournament that suit your mood at the time. It's a liberating and genuinely absorbing way to go about a racing simulator career, completely removing the grind associated with racing the slowest cars in order to eventually be rewarded with the fastest. By taking away the idea that you need to win races to fund the purchase of new cars, you feel much more like a race driver working up the ladder than you ever do in *Forza* or *Gran Turismo*. It's the racing that matters – not your bank balance.

The sentiment is mirrored in the handling model, which is geared much more towards the 'hardcore' racing fan than the majority of racers to ever have appeared on a console. If you're racing with a number of the optional assists on then you'll have little problem, but as soon as you enter a race naked and without any help then problems will start to reveal themselves for many potential players.

Project Cars' handling model is so sensitive that a racing wheel is required if you're playing without the assists. Yes, you will be able to get the car around the track using an analogue stick, but your level of control will be lacking. To get the most out of this game you are going to need to invest in a new piece of hardware.

That might put off some people, but there's enough content here to make the upgrade worth the expense. As well as your ever-lasting career, there's the online realm to tackle with 16-player races across every track and car combination… all unlocked from the off, of course. Finding a good group of people to race against for an evening is a joy given the volume of options available, from full race weekends with variable weather and an hour-long (or even longer) race through to quick three-lap sprints.

The number of car options available to you immediately makes a career exclusively focused on multiplayer a legitimate option. If you don't want to, you don't need to touch the single player game at all to get the most out of this package. That's the real achievement here: that you can play it however you like. By removing any elements of linear progression, Slightly Mad has proven that players are smart enough to come up with their own direction through a game like this. Long may this approach to design reign.

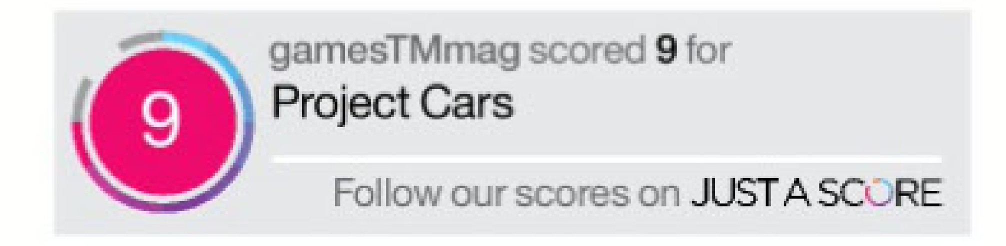
FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

OPEN SEASON: *Project Cars* abandons the traditional racing sim career progression system for something much more open. The result is much closer to what you'd expect a career in motorsport to be.

VERDICT

THE KIND OF SHAKE-UP THAT THIS GENRE BADLY NEEDED



CALL OF DULUX

Splatoon

Nintendo hasn't been synonymous with multiplayer shooters since the Nintendo 64 days, when the likes of *GoldenEye* and *Perfect Dark* made it the console of choice for putting one between your friends' eyes. *Splatoon* is an attempt to recapture some of that magic with a brand new IP and the results are promising, even if said promise isn't entirely fulfilled.

Unlike the four-player split-screen days of Rare's iconic N64 gems however, *Splatoon* is very much in keeping with today's focus on online multiplayer. If you play your Wii U offline then a massive chunk of this game will be off-limits to you. This is an eight-player online shooter first and foremost, with other modes and features seemingly added mainly for the sake of variation.

Put in teams of four, players are tasked with splattering ink all over the arena in an attempt to cover as much of it with their team's colour as possible. There are two match types, at least at launch: Turf War is a standard timed affair in which teams are informed via a percentage at the end who coloured the largest area, while the King Of The Hill style Splat Zones has you trying to protect small sections of the map so they stay your colour for a period of time.

Though there are around 20 different types of main weapon, which are gradually unlocked at the in-game shop as you level up, the majority of the earlier ones fall within three main categories. The splattershot is the game's version of an assault rifle, offering short range automatic fire and letting you spread large quantities of paint around you quickly. The splat charger, meanwhile, is a sniper rifle equivalent: fairly useless at painting the arena but great at killing enemies with a single hit from long distances. Finally, the splat roller is the melee weapon of the game, letting you cover massive quantities of ground with paint but leaving you exposed to gun-toting opponents.

The weapons are surprisingly well-balanced: even though a previous hour-long open beta period had some convinced the roller was overpowered this isn't actually the case once you figure out each gun's strengths and weaknesses, meaning a good splattershot player can take out a bad roller player with relative ease. The multi-tiered maps are also expertly designed with these strengths and weaknesses in mind, meaning splat charger players will want to quickly head for the highest

DETAILS

FORMAT: Wii U
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Nintendo
DEVELOPER: In-House
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-2 (1-8 Online)
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes



Above: Cover enough of the floor with paint without dying and you'll be able to activate a special weapon. The Inkzooka, for example, lets you fire massive paint tornadoes across the screen for a limited time. Right: When you respawn you can tap one of your teammates' names on the GamePad screen and you'll blast into the air, soaring across and landing next to them.



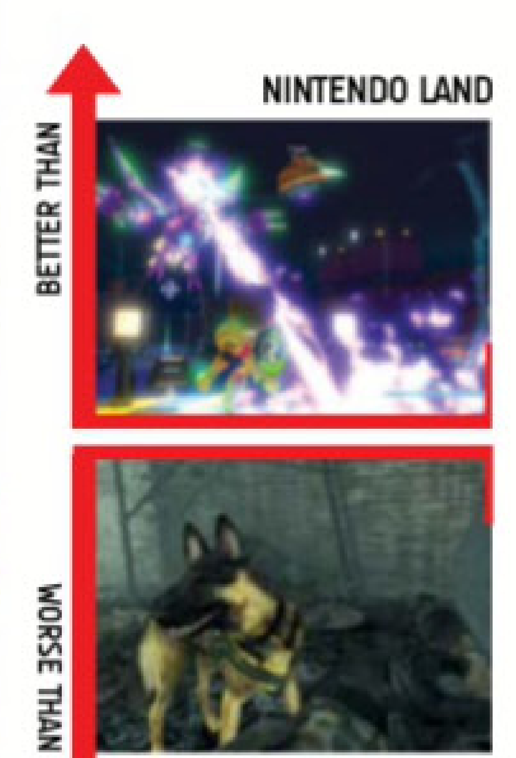


DRESSED FOR SUCCESS

You can customise your Inkling's clothing by buying new items from the various stores in the main hub with coins earned from taking park in multiplayer battles. These aren't just there for cosmetic purposes: the hats, shirts and shoes you equip each have their own special abilities, which affect things like ink refill speed, shot damage and how quickly you'll respawn after you're killed by an opponent. You can also level up clothing by wearing it in battles, which adds extra abilities to it. Nintendo promises that more clothing will be added for free to the game on a regular basis, meaning over time online multiplayer sessions will feature a wide variety of fashion styles, and therefore playing styles too.



BETTER THAN
NINTENDO LAND



WORSE THAN
CALL OF DUTY: GHOSTS

points to snipe from above while roller players will head for the ground where the largest paintable surface area often is.

For solo players not too keen on the online side of things, there's still some content in *Splatoon* to keep you busy for a while. Octo Valley is a single-player mode featuring around 30 stages that do away with the whole 'paint the ground' concept and switch to a more traditional enemy-blasting format. It also stealthily doubles as a tutorial for the online mode however, with each stage introducing a new mechanic or technique that will help prepare you for the bit Nintendo really wants you to be playing. There's also an amiibo Challenge mode that unlocks 20 challenge stages each when you scan one of Nintendo's three *Splatoon*-themed NFC toys; and the Battle Dojo, a two-player balloon-popping contest in which one player uses the GamePad and the other uses the TV. Clearly, then, this is very much Nintendo's *Call Of Duty:* not because of its weapons-based gameplay, but because the online multiplayer is front and centre.

This is no surprise, because for the most part playing online is brilliant. Using the GamePad's motion controls to aim is deeply satisfying and the netcode is solid with no noticeable lag or issues during the sessions we took part in. That, of course, doesn't mean it isn't without its issues. Most notably is the complete lack of player communication.

WORLDWIDE

TAKING GAMING ONLINE

THE WAITING GAME: Online matches won't start until there are eight human players in the lobby. Luckily there's Squid Jump, a NES-style game that can be played on the GamePad while you wait.

It's bewildering that a game built around four-player teams offers no way of talking to your teammates, be that through voice chat or even text. This wouldn't be a massive issue were you taking part in 'kill or be killed' death-matches but when the aim is to paint the arena and there are a myriad of tactical possibilities in which to approach this task, not being able to form a battle plan in advance is massively infuriating. As, incidentally, is the lack of an option to quickly change your weapon or gear between rounds: instead you have to quit out of the mode, equip your new items, then connect online again.

Nintendo promises *Splatoon* will continue to grow, with a big update in August offering the ability to form four-person teams with your friends. Hopefully this will bring voice chat with it, so you can at least talk tactics within private groups of people you know. A steady stream of new stages to add to the five already available is also promised. By doing so though, Nintendo is essentially confirming that *Splatoon* isn't complete at launch. The five maps are great now, but they'll grate if you're playing them over and over again for weeks on end while waiting for new content. What's here is undoubtedly clever and thoroughly entertaining, but it's also limited and given Nintendo's history with new IPs, be prepared for the possibility that its online community may have dwindled by the time the promised DLC makes up the fuller package envisioned.

FAQs

Q. HOW'S THE SOUNDTRACK?
Great. A wide range of musical styles sung in gibberish Inkling language. Sounds a bit like Jet Set Radio.

Q. WHICH AMIIBO ARE SUPPORTED?
Only the three Splatoon amiibo toys: Inkling Boy, Inkling Girl and Squid. Each unlocks 20 challenge missions.

Q. WHAT IS THE MOST AWFUL CHARACTER PUN?
Most characters in the game have names that are puns on sea creatures. The worst is Crusty Sean (crustacean).

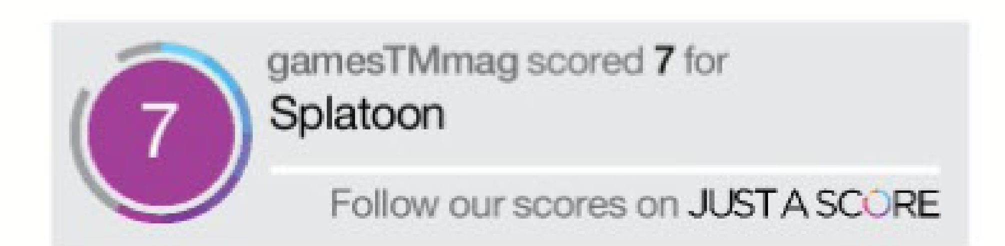
IT'S BEWILDERING THAT A GAME BUILT AROUND TEAM-BASED MULTIPLAYER OFFERS NO WAY OF TALKING TO YOUR TEAMMATES



Above: Players you encounter on your online travels will populate the game's hub area, along with messages they posted to Miiverse. If you like the look of their outfits you can buy them from a shady dealer in an alleyway. Seriously. **Left:** You're also armed with secondary weapons, such as these bombs, which can be thrown grenade-style to splatter paint from a distance.

VERDICT

FUN AND COLOURFUL SHOOTER BUT NEEDS MORE CONTENT



TWO WRONGS DON'T MAKE A REICH

Wolfenstein: The Old Blood

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox One, PC
ORIGIN: Sweden
PUBLISHER: Bethesda
DEVELOPER: MachineGames
PRICE: £14.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

Nazis, castles, some ancient magic and then a few zombies. That's the *Wolfenstein* staple. It's been established, it's been done and it's not likely to change much in the coming years. You'd think that formula was so stringent that it'd keep you in check, that it'd be hard to actually weave an interesting, sensitive, *different* experience around those four age-old bedposts. Well, as it turns out, you can.

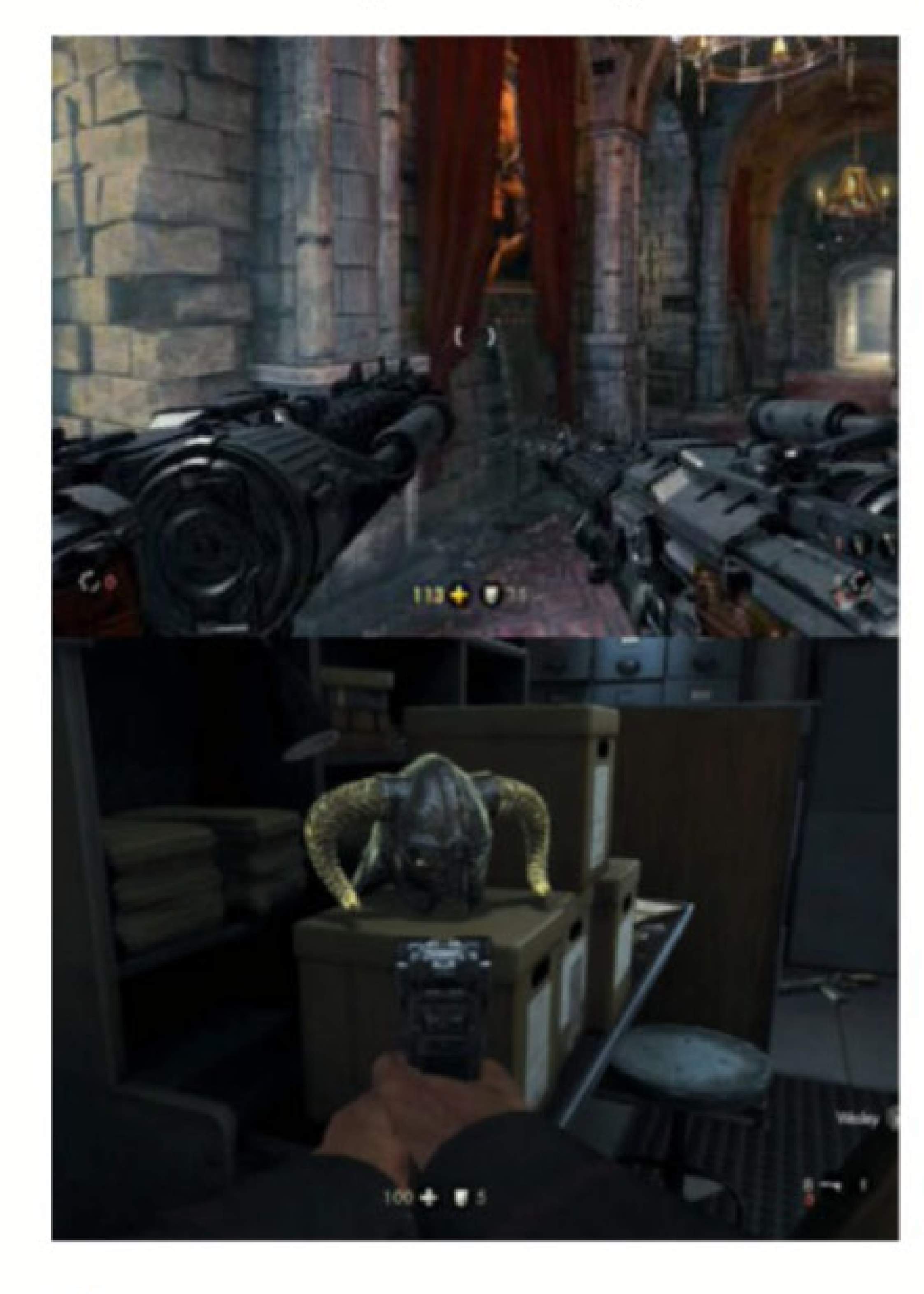
The Old Blood reneges on a little of what made *The New Order* (MachineGames' first stab at this series) so special – the writing of the central story takes a dip (more on that later) and the nascent self-awareness that made the reboot so fresh has waned, too. That's not to say *The Old Blood* takes itself seriously, though; it just lacks the broader sense of futility and frustration that was mimicked by the main characters so well in *The New Order.*

So let's backtrack a little – for anyone that didn't play the 2014 FPS by MachineGames, it was a treat of a game: wrapping some meaty shooting mechanics with *Wolfenstein* mainstays pushed to the very end of their absurd limits, *The New Blood* was a deconstruction of WWII shooters we had seen in the years since the original *Wolfenstein* titles back in the day. You, Captain B.J. Blazkowicz, screw up a mission straight away and become incarcerated in a Nazi-run mental asylum, slowly regaining your motor functions as those around you are taken away to be brutally executed. It invests you straight away – not just in yourself (read: B.J.), but in the world, in this peculiar new Nazi-run super-state, full of injustice and persecution, as you might expect.

The Old Blood has two major flaws – firstly, that you know the outcome of the game from the second you boot it up. As a direct prequel to *The New Order* (*The Old Blood* ends *exactly* where *The New Blood* picks up), you sort-of know the route you're taking to the end. Which would be fine, if all you were doing was taking down eldritch Nazi super-men. Alas, *The Old Blood* justifies its carnage with an over-arching mission: take down a top Nazi archaeologist, and destroy the mysterious occult relics she's been digging up. Now, this

Right: The first portion of the game sees you take on the wily Rudi 'The Warden' Jäger – a vile man that has a penchant for feeding prisoners to dogs.

Below: We don't think we will ever get bored of dual-wielding in games (when it's pulled off well). You're practically unstoppable with two shotguns in *The Old Blood.*

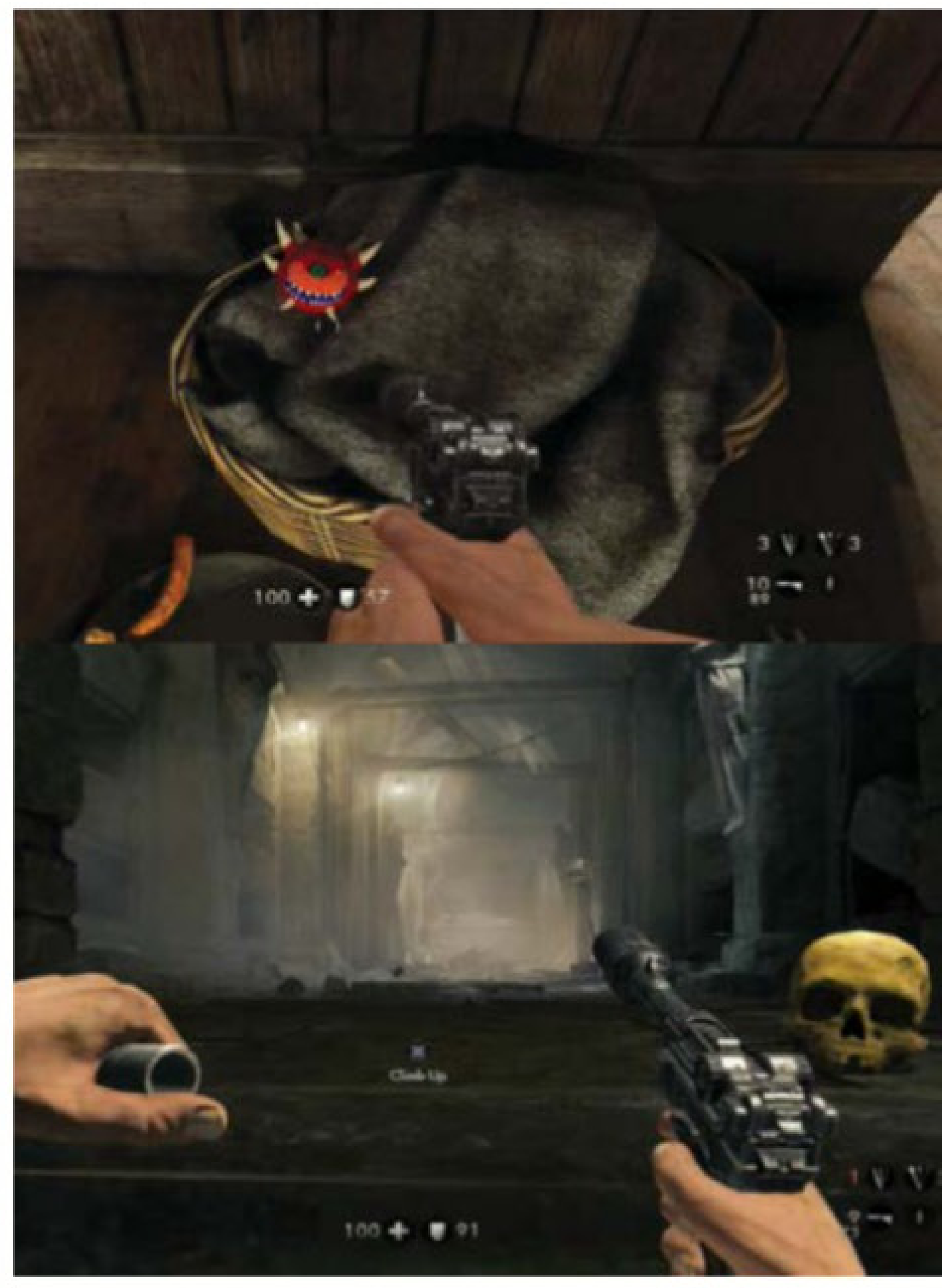


Above: Recognise the helmet? This is just one of the *many* little cheeky references that MachineGames has hidden in *The Old Blood...*

Below: We never thought we'd actually see Castle Wolfenstein's dank interior done up properly, in uncannily realistic graphics.



ONCE AGAIN, MACHINEGAMES AND BETHESDA PROVE THAT AS A PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER DUO, THEY KNOW HOW TO SHIP A PRODUCT



Above: We're stealth apologists, so when the sections of the game that require you to take out Captains come around... we crack our knuckles and bring out our throwing knives



RETURN TO CASTLE WOLFENSTEIN

Where *The New Order* hid a level of *Wolfenstein 3D* deep in its bowels, *The Old Blood* does it *seven* more times, basically recreating the whole game for you to play through as a fully mobile, 3D-rendered B. J. Blazkowicz. Initially, we *loved* this little surprise (denoted as 'nightmares' in the game itself), but it became stale fairly quickly: the punchy MIDI soundtrack grates once you've heard the same eight-second loop 40 times, and the appeal of shooting 2D models wears thin some ten minutes down the line. Once was nice in *The New Order*, but seven times in *The New Blood* (with trophy support for all you completionists) is over-egging the pudding a little too much...



occult superweapon is supposed to be a point of tension, a potentially world-ending device so powerful it could win the war outright... except you never heard anything about it in *The New Blood*, so...

The second flaw is something we had to think a little bit more carefully about – and depending on your FPS outlook, you could consider it a positive or a negative. Some of the levels (particularly towards the end of a chapter) devolve from the traditionally labyrinthine *Wolfenstein* layouts into simple arenas: played on Easy/Medium, you can saunter around, dual shotguns cocked, laughing like a maniac and dismembering everything with a pulse. On Hard/Ultra Hard, these arenas become much less fun – it's not a puzzle (like Hard modes in *Halo*, *Call Of Duty*, *Destiny*...) but rather a simple endurance test. Find the safe zone (there always is one: a bar, an elevator, a vantage point) and take cover, potshotting distant foes or shotgunning ones that come close. This is one FPS fan's idea of bliss and another's idea of hell on Earth.

We appreciate that hardcore shooter fans want a challenge, and usually we're up for that. But at times, the level design became grindy, un-fun, and repetitive. Where *The New Order* let you stealth through sections with some *amazingly* tight stealth mechanics and stealth routes, *The Old Blood* seems to do away with that, instead forcing you to engage in these supposedly climactic battles. There are still some stealth sections in there, and they're still done impeccably well, but we can't help but feel these shootouts could have been reserved for Bethesda (and id Software's) *Doom* reboot next year.

Aside from that, MachineGames and Bethesda prove once again that as a publisher/developer duo, they know how to ship a product: glitchless and bugless in our playthrough, the audio mix is superb, with each weapon personified with its own sonic presence. Each enemy is identifiable through their silhouette and colour scheme, too. That might sound like an obvious comment, but in a game all about choosing the right weapon (or weapons, if you're into dual-wielding) at the right time, the presentation of the enemies in *The Old Blood* is flawless. It makes those chapter-ending breaks in the rhythm more bearable, at any rate. This is a developer proving that it knows a thing or two about getting the foundations right on its shooter releases.

It's not as if *The Old Blood* is a bad experience – we actually enjoyed it so much we mopped up our first playthrough in one sitting – it's just got a difficult history to live up to. Still, Bethesda fans will have plenty to look out for – easter eggs and collectibles abound throughout the game's nine chapters, with bonus Nightmare levels (see boxout) for extra meat on the bones.

As a standalone DLC add-on, though, it's a great use of the engine. It's the inverted version of *Far Cry 3*'s *Blood Dragon* – where the DLC stood head and shoulders above the main game. *The Old Blood* itself is a wonderful example of what the engine could do, but the deeper experience inevitably lies in the parent game. It certainly doesn't disprove that MachineGames is a studio to be watched however and may even be further proof that more can be asked of this team.

FAQs

Q. CAN I DUAL-WIELD SHOTGUNS?
You absolutely can, and we would heartily advise doing this at every opportunity.

Q. CAN I KILL HITLER?
What a question! Sadly, you can't. Though there are some cheeky Hitler-themed easter eggs in one of the *Wolfenstein 3D* 'nightmare levels'.

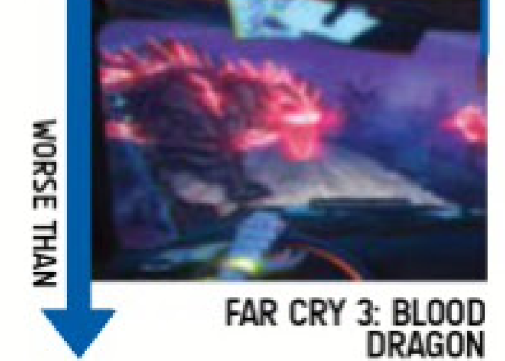
Q. WHY CAN I WEAR DOG ARMOUR?
One of the characters in *The Old Blood* cares about his dogs more than his soldiers... perhaps he outfitted them in his dead privates' gear?

BETTER THAN



WOLFENSTEIN (2009)

WORSE THAN



FAR CRY 3: BLOOD DRAGON

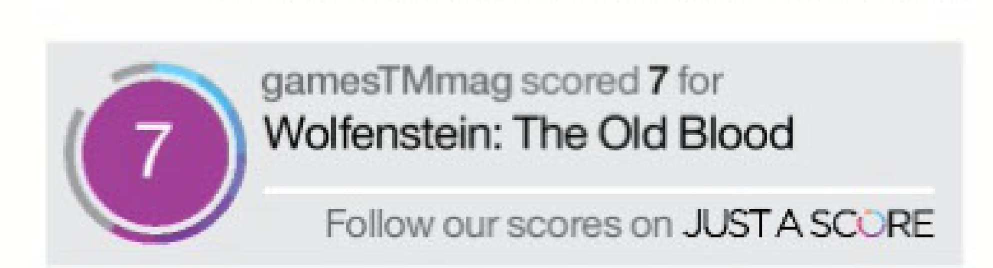
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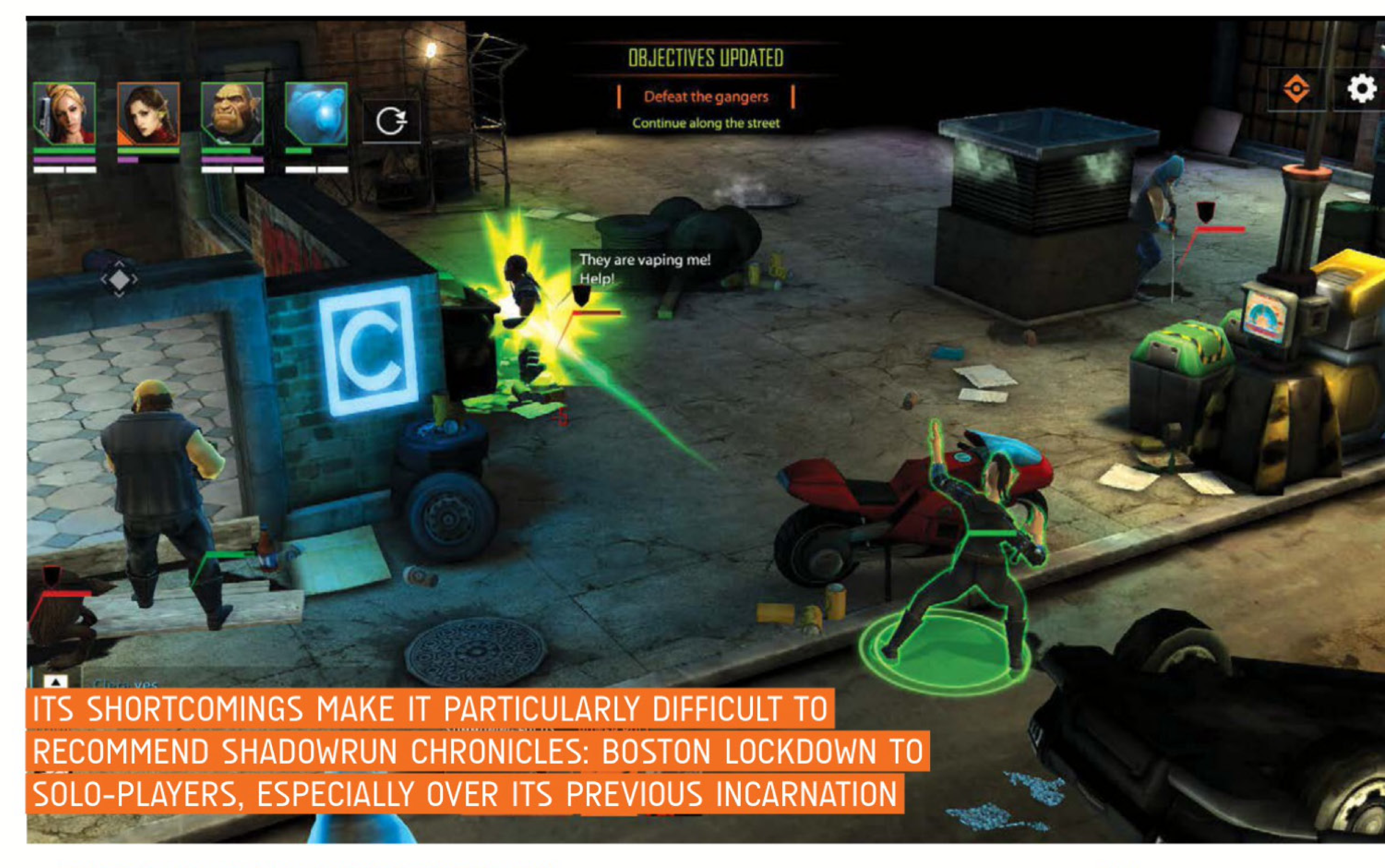
WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

OCCULT STATUS: *The Old Blood*, for all its narrative foibles, doesn't take itself too seriously – and how can it, with its undead Nazi warriors and stalking cyborg doggies?

VERDICT

A DLC CARE PACKAGE THAT JUST UNDERPERFORMS





ITS SHORTCOMINGS MAKE IT PARTICULARLY DIFFICULT TO RECOMMEND SHADOWRUN CHRONICLES: BOSTON LOCKDOWN TO SOLO-PLAYERS, ESPECIALLY OVER ITS PREVIOUS INCARNATION

Above: *Shadowrun*'s fiction mixes cyberpunk elements with fantasy powers, making it just as likely that you'll put enemies into a tech-induced coma as it is that you'll smite your foes with a bear from the spirit world.

MUST LEARN TO WALK BEFORE IT CAN RUN

Shadowrun Chronicles: Boston Lockdown

After a successful crowd-funding campaign and subsequent confusion about its name, shape and form, *Shadowrun Chronicles: Boston Lockdown* – formerly *Shadowrun Online* – is at last ready to be judged solely on its merits. The first chapter of an always-online turn-based strategy title that supports one to four-player co-op teams, *Shadowrun Chronicles* carries the weight of expectation of both franchise fans and of wider genre aficionados alike.

Unfortunately, our early experience with *Shadowrun* was plagued by technical gripes commonly associated with an Early Access title and again, once it was released into the wild, with strained servers. Still, by the time you read this it should have shrugged off its early technical hiccups, so the question is whether what lies beneath is a truly compelling turn-based title and if it fulfils its at-a-glance potential as a tantalising mix of *XCOM: Enemy Unknown*, cyberpunk sensibilities and fantasy elements.

The simple answer is no, it doesn't, and while it has one or two interesting ideas of its own, it can only disappoint those who come to it hoping to find something of the quality, depth and polish exhibited by Firaxis' title. Nonetheless, the basic nuts and bolts are broadly similar to *XCOM*, so those that have invested time there will feel at home, with a familiar split of a non-combat hub area and combat-orientated missions out in the field.

A garishly-lit, grimy back alley serves as your home stomping ground and offers a place to manage character progression and gear load-outs, as well as pick-up missions from a shady but genial troll. Here, player interaction is limited to text-chat and so a steady stream of game requests soon fill-up the always-on chat window.

While you're here, though, there are a dozen skill trees through which to distribute Karma points and vendors from whom to purchase gear, weapons and armour. The nature of your progression and arsenal largely depends on your preferred play-style, but will be determined in part by an initial choice of character from one of five fantasy racial archetypes, along with a selection of backgrounds that determine any stat bonuses and penalties.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: Mac, Steam OS, Linux
ORIGIN: Austria
PUBLISHER: Cliffhanger Productions
DEVELOPER: In-House
PRICE: £34.99
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1-4 online
MINIMUM SPEC: Windows 7/Windows 8.1, CPU 2.0+ GHz or better, 2 GB RAM, 1024 MB NVidia or ATI graphics card, 3 GB available HDD space, Internet connection is required
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

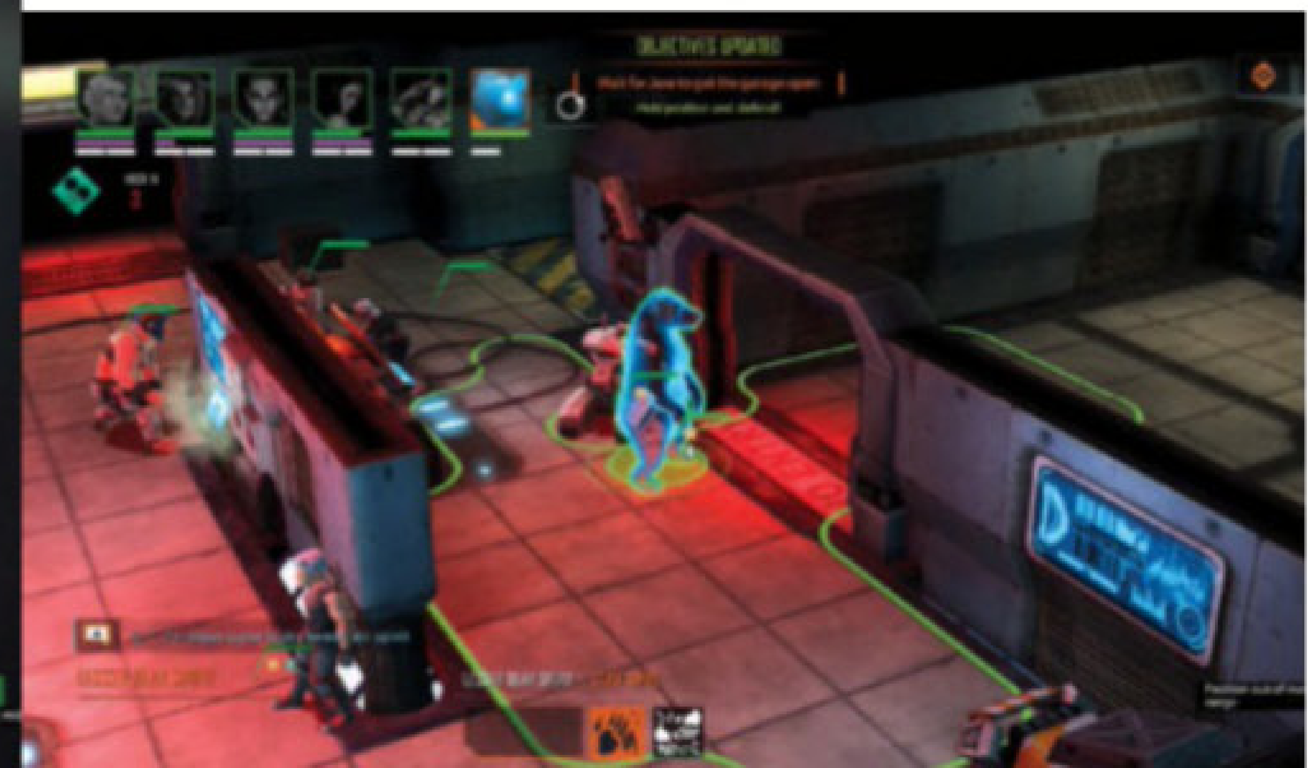
FAQs

Q. CAN I PLAY SOLO?
Yes, the entire game is playable solo with player-controlled bots. You'll still need an internet connection, though.

Q. ARE THE BOTS USEFUL?
Only to a certain point, they feel deliberately underpowered so as to push you toward co-op play.

Q. IS IT JUST *XCOM* WITH MAGIC?
Sadly, no. It employs many of the same mechanics and tricks but lacks the strategic edge and polish of Firaxis' classic.





Left: A wealth of customisation options offer a chance to individualise your chosen character and outfit them in something other than the default grey. However, the basic visuals do little to encourage you to do so.





Below: The quirks and jerks of the camera make occasional missteps to undesirable locations a frustrating inevitability. The switch to an action-orientated kill-cam can also cause the camera to lurch, obscuring the very action it's trying to highlight.

Whether you favour the brute force approach of a shotgun combined with doling out blunt force trauma with a modified 2x4 or prefer pistol-play, automatic firearms or bladed weapons, there are a host of skills and equipment to support your choices. Those looking for something a little more in keeping with the fantasy sci-fi aesthetic are well-served by exotic options of tech-weapons, drone deployment, spell-slinging and summoning rituals. What *Shadowrun* does not do is take the time early on to impress upon you the importance of specialisation to long-term success. Regardless of initial character choices, you begin with an inventory stocked with one of each type of weapon or tool, which suggests a freeform approach to experimentation.

With only enough Karma points to make inroads into a few of the dozen skill trees, and some upgrade choices excluding others, it greatly benefits you to take time to pore over those initial choices and focus on two to form your primary and secondary combat options. There's a degree of flexibility in the underlying system, with a host of passive skills available to bolster your more pro-active skills, but the game does a poor job of equipping you with the knowledge to make informed choices.

You'll soon discover how effective your character choices are as you embark on *Shadowrun*'s missions. For the first few hours, you're funnelled down a linear story path that is by turns both quirky and dull. These runs consist of buddying-up with between one and three other team members that can be made-up of real people or a selection of stock computer buddies.

Once on a run, the individual skills and traits that you've either taken time to explore or blindly chosen can be employed against a host of basic AI stooges using a two-action turn system. Most of the attacks lack any sense of connection or flair and while there's also the ability to interact with a number of environmental features, allowing appropriately equipped players to pick locks or harvest organs for loot, none of the equipment you gather is particularly well-realised or exciting.

Shadowrun's identity is very much informed by its previous moniker of *Shawdowrun Online*. It's not just that co-op play is more rewarding than solo-play, but that playing alone actually becomes unsatisfying and frustrating. The computer sidekicks begin to feel deliberately nerfed, pushing you to seek out other players to succeed in later missions. Meanwhile, the upgrade system requires a certain degree of grind and replaying missions with other people in order to earn enough Karma points to properly explore the skill trees.

These frustrations make it particularly difficult to recommend *Shadowrun Chronicles: Boston Lockdown* to solo-players, especially over its previous incarnation, *Shadowrun Return's Dragonfall*. Playing with others addresses some of the issues, but it's only with a group of friends with characters tailored to complement one another, that you begin to derive any of fun from it. Longer term developer support may iron out many of its issues, but as it stands *Shadowrun Chronicles: Boston Lockdown* boasts little to enthral any but the most diehard of fans.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

SHALLOWRUN: While later missions become more involved and demand a greater degree of strategic thinking, the early missions are bland, lack challenge and are in need of rebalancing.

CONNECTION DROPPED

Considering that *Shadowrun Chronicles: Boston Lockdown* is geared primarily towards online play, the methods and UI are severely limited. There's no specific means to see what missions other players are attempting or requesting help for, nor any way to queue for a particular run and have players join you. Instead, everything is managed through the text-chat, leading to a constant stream of requests for missions or help. It's a messy way for players to interact and reaffirms why *Shadowrun* is best approached in an organised way with friends.

BETTER THAN: OMERTA: CITY OF GANGSTERS

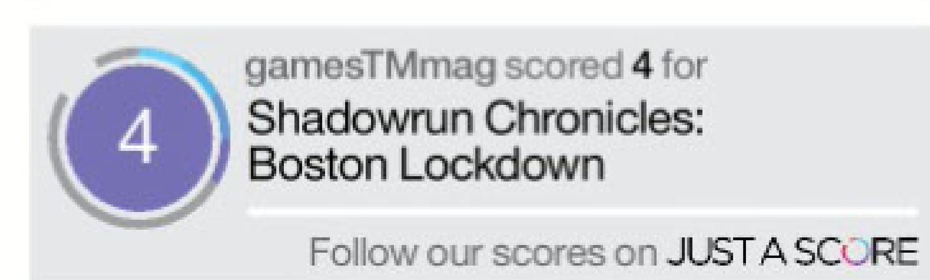


WORSE THAN: XCOM: ENEMY UNKNOWN

VERDICT



JACK OF ALL TRADES, MASTER OF NONE





Left: If you've got a wired Xbox 360 controller to hand, get it on the go for *Halo: Spartan Strike*. It is without a doubt the best way to experience and enjoy the frantic action.

DAMNED IF YOU DO, DAMNED IF YOU DON'T

Halo: Spartan Strike

***Halo* just shouldn't work as a top-down, twin-stick shooter.** That isn't conjecture, it's a straight-up fact, and you just have to look towards the state that 2014's *Halo: Spartan Assault* was launched in as the evidence.

Instead of attempting to once again force-feed the remnants of Bungie's original design into a foreign framework and hoping for the best, Vanguard has gone back to basics with *Halo: Spartan Strike* – the result is decidedly more positive. In fact, there are times where *Spartan Strike* feels like it would have fit snugly between *Contra* and *Smash TV* arcade cabinets.

Vanguard knows it will never be able to replicate the nuance of *Halo*'s combat from a top-down distance, so instead, it simply fixed the reticule system to make aiming at distance more engaging and entertaining. It has recognised that half the fun of a top-down shooter is forcing you to make snap decisions against ever surmounting odds.

It's at the halfway mark of this four-hour, 20-mission adventure where things really begin to get interesting. *Halo 4*'s Prometheans force you to juggle new tactics and weapons efficiently, especially if you're striving for the top accolades and scores. Unlike *Spartan Assault*'s monotonous runs through boring levels, *Spartan Strike* is essentially a tactical top-down experience – ammo limitations, regenerating foes and constant, brutal waves of various enemy types, means you're always kept on your fingertips.

Vanguard has, however, found itself in a bit of a damned if you do, damned if you don't situation. While microtransactions have been removed, an equally depressing XP-grind has been introduced. If you want any chance of unlocking the five bonus levels you'll need to earn a Gold Medal on every level. That requires the use of XP boosters that can only be unlocked by grinding ad nauseam through the levels. Worse still, none of this can be done with friends because *Spartan Strike* doesn't include split-screen or online multiplayer.

Multiplayer is a frustrating oversight, as the overall package is so close to getting it right. The action is fast and furious, the sacred *Halo* combat trinity – guns, grenades, and melee attacks – has been translated as well as it's ever going to be. *Spartan Strike* is proof that *Halo* can exist comfortably outside its FPS state, not to mention proof that the top-down shooter genre is still alive and kicking.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: Mac, iOS
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: Microsoft Game Studios
DEVELOPER: Vanguard Entertainment
PRICE: £5.99
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



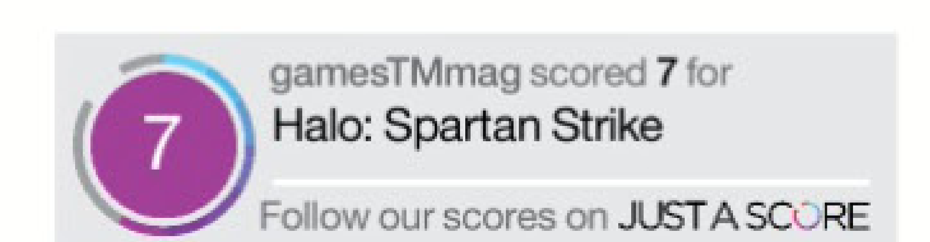
FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

SOLO SO ALONE: The lack of online or split screen co-operative multiplayer is disappointing, especially as Halo: Spartan Assault included it for the eventual console release.

VERDICT

PROOF *HALO* CAN EXIST AS A TWIN-STICK SHOOTER





Above: The addition of the Prometheans works massively well here. The enemies bring a new dynamic to the waves, while the weapons are incredibly fun to find and use.

GOTTA MATCH 'EM ALL

Puzzles & Dragons Z + Super Mario Bros. Edition

Confined to the screens of mobiles and tablets for the past few years, *Puzzles & Dragons Z* is the first instalment of the series to be made available for a set price, micro-transactions being scrapped here in favour of a flat fee. Incorporating the game's traditional match-three battle system with some new RPG elements, this console debut is hit and miss, with a lack of originality leading to disappointment.

For those unaware of what *Puzzles & Dragons* is about, the game is pretty much what it says on the tin, although it's not quite as simple this time around. With actual characters and a storyline, you play as a dragon tamer in the Rangers, a group dedicated to restoring world order after your land is torn apart by the evil organisation Paradox. Battling your way through the dungeons in the surrounding areas of your hub, Zed City, it's your job to free the five Skydragons being enslaved by the group's leaders, a feat you'll be aided in by your teams of given and found elemental monsters.

DETAILS

FORMAT: 3DS
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Nintendo
DEVELOPER: GungHo Online Entertainment
PRICE: £24.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



A half-decent story, the ideas for it are at least original, but when it comes to the implementation of some of the game's other features, things start getting all too familiar. From your first meeting with the Captain to the overall look, feel and way you interact with Zed City, certain aspects of *Puzzles & Dragons Z* are very reminiscent of another, popular creature-based franchise, the line between inspiration and imitation being a little too close. Some elements, such as monster evolutions which are done here via a machine, feel different enough, but overall the game largely lacks in unique and fresh concepts, and this undermines the new ideas that are brought to the table.

SYNTHESIS

BRINGING GENRES TOGETHER

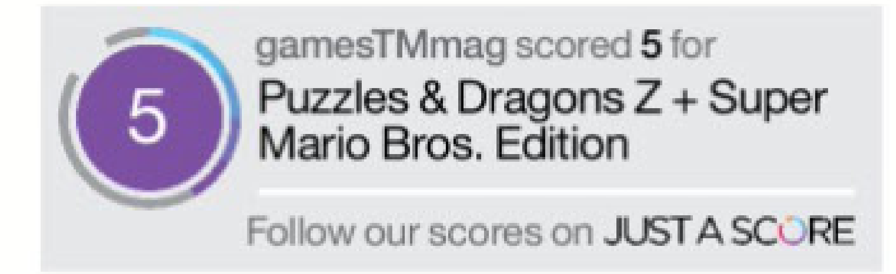
GAMING FUSION: Mixing puzzle action with RPG attributes, *Puzzles & Dragons Z* blends together the two genres, side quests and dialogue choices mixing with piece puzzles and move planning.

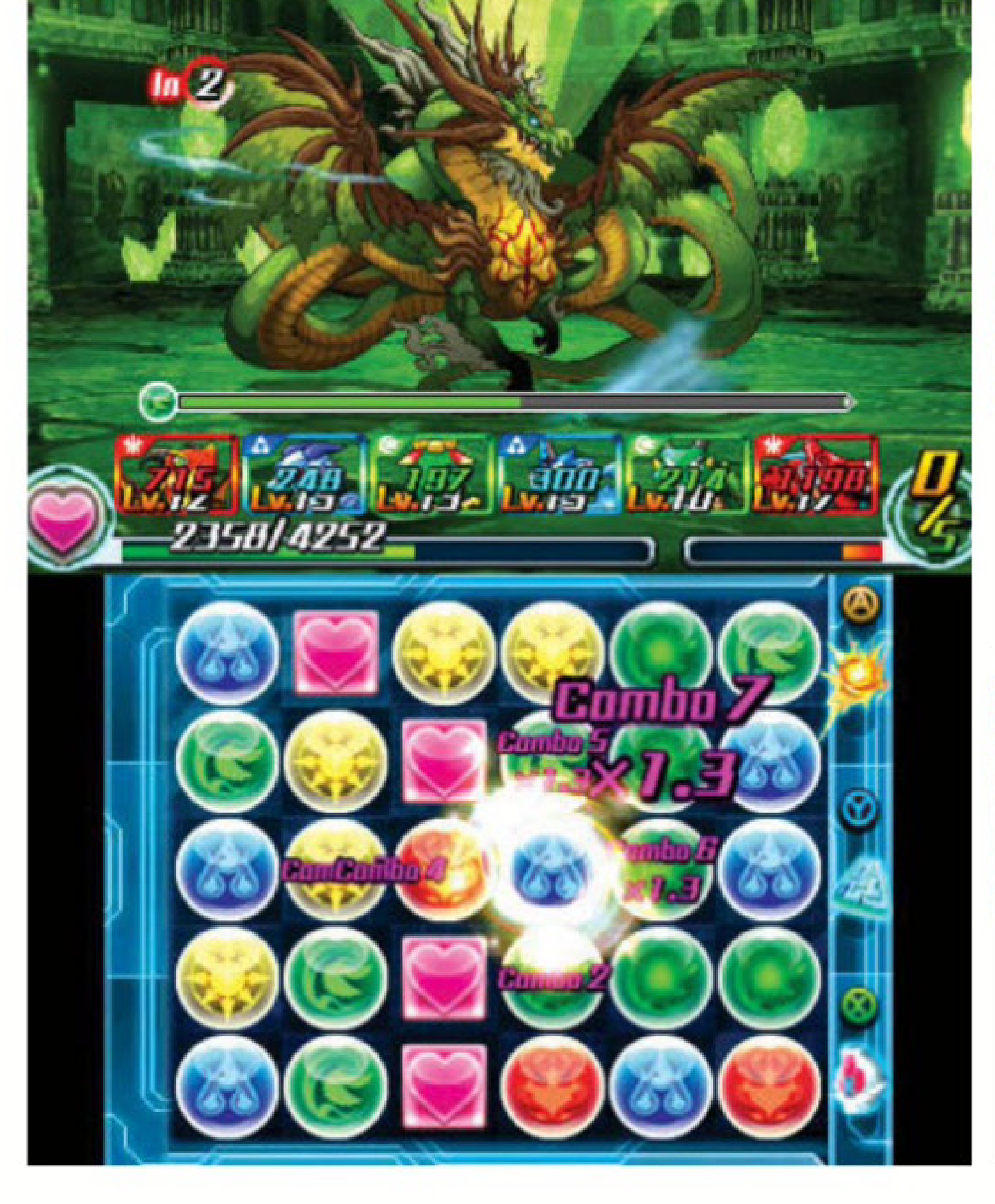
When it comes to actual battles, though, the combination of the match-three system and the turn-based method works very well together, making for a highly enjoyable side to the game. Which colour orbs you match determines which type of creatures in your team attack, and so strategic thinking is needed to ensure the right enemy weaknesses are capitalised on, as well as the right combos. Surprisingly difficult, the battles are fun to play, with the idea of the skills gauge, which can be used to unleash your monsters' specialities, and the outside helper being two of the game's best ideas.

As for the addition of the *Super Mario* version, the extra title comprises basically the same gameplay as *Puzzles & Dragons Z*, except with Mario and friends. With the story surrounding yet another capture of Princess Peach at the hands of Bowser, this inclusion feels less like an attempt at giving the audience two great games for the price of one and more like a clever marketing scheme to get your attention. Granted, it's a smart idea – but as an actual game, it provides a bit of fan fare and not much else.

VERDICT

INTERESTING BATTLE SYSTEM, DISAPPOINTING GAME





Left: Getting those big combos is everything. The excitement you feel as the numbers rise is the most fun and exhilarating aspect of the game.





Left: A constant monster companion, the blue monster Syrup doesn't just relay his own name back to you – instead, his witty remarks and bouts of anger actually provide your mute character with a verbal outlet.

A DREAM OF THE FAYTH

Final Fantasy X/X-2 HD Remaster

Though we only covered the *Remastered* version of Square Enix's *Final Fantasy X* package last year, we thought it was important to give the PS4 version of the collection a look-in, too – had all three formats of the game come out at the same time, it would have meant waiting a good six months for the PS4 to actually launch: it's clear that Square just wants to give everyone the opportunity to play one of the most critically acclaimed games on PS2 all over again.

While the PS3 version insisted on giving you a re-recorded take on *X*'s exemplary OST, the PS4 version reverts, weirdly, to the MIDI-laden original. We feel that's a slightly odd choice, since some of the reworked tracks were an addition to the experience – but then at least you can switch between the versions at will (hidden in some options menus), so that's something. Graphically, there isn't much of a step up from what the game was doing on Vita and PS3, but if you're looking closely – or have a TV big enough to show it – you can notice some upgrades to the NPC and monster models, with all-round smoother textures and some slight enhancements to colour along the way.

But look a little deeper and you can see where it gets a bit weird: the PS4 version of *Final Fantasy X* has a glitch that breaks the random number generation that runs the back-end of the game. That means that loot tables, damage values and any random encounters stats can be bugged, giving you the same item as a drop, the same enemy to fight, the same *outcome* for every fight. In a game whose core mechanics revolve around chance and gambling on a good 'roll', this is catastrophically game-breaking. We had a save from the Vita version in the Omega Ruins (the 'end game' dungeon) and noticed that the random loot that spawns there would be the same every time. When you're trying to harvest Dark Matter for your end-game push, it's frustrating to only ever get given weapons you already have… no word on a fix for this yet, either, and we're writing this a couple of weeks after the game's been on the shelves.

Still, cross-saving is a feature that remains as user-friendly as it was in the original package; brilliant for those of you who didn't finish the game on PS3 or Vita beforehand. *Final Fantasy X-2* remains practically impossible to Platinum without a guide (there are *so* many missable elements in each Chapter) and the Last Mission bonus game mode acts as a satisfying gauntlet to run Rikku, Paine and Yuna through if you ever get bored of the nonsense story, which you probably will.

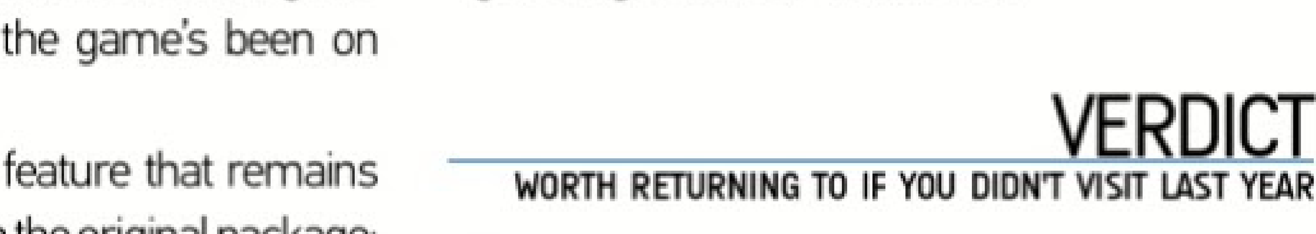
So aside from some visual enhancements and the option to flit between OSTs, the game doesn't really offer you anything you wouldn't have had on the PS3/Vita. While it's still an essential part of any JRPG fan's collection, we recommend grabbing it on PS3/Vita instead.



FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: PS3/Vita
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Square Enix
DEVELOPER: In-house, Vituos Games
PRICE: £24.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

Below: The environments occasionally look so nice they seem pre-rendered – a nostalgic throwback to past *FF*.

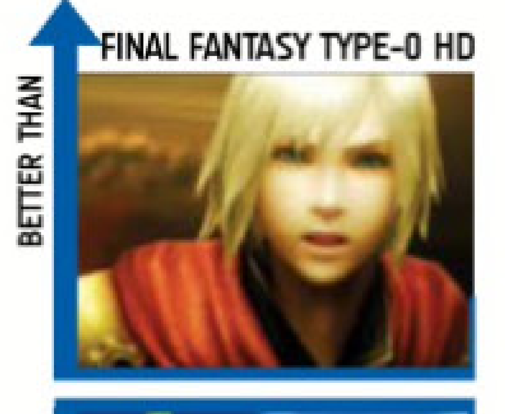


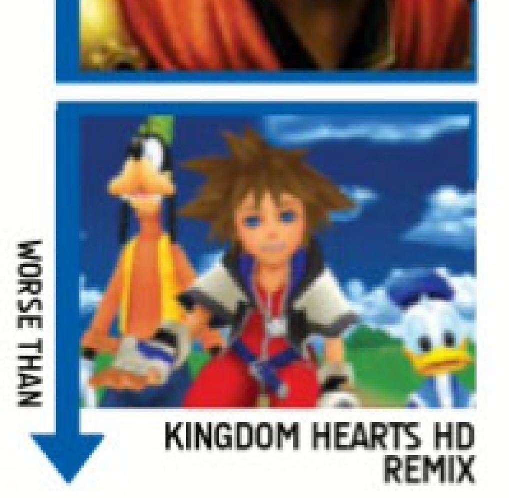


BLITZ OFF: We'd happily pay the full price of a PSN game for the Blitzball mini-game itself – the most complete and engrossing side-quest of any *Final Fantasy* game to date.

BETTER THAN

FINAL FANTASY TYPE-0 HD



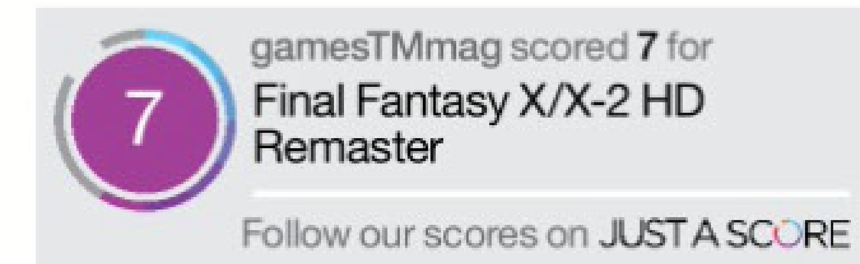


KINGDOM HEARTS HD REMIX

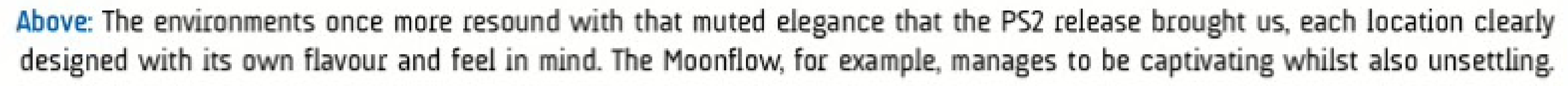
WORSE THAN

VERDICT

WORTH RETURNING TO IF YOU DIDN'T VISIT LAST YEAR







Above: The environments once more resound with that muted elegance that the PS2 release brought us, each location clearly designed with its own flavour and feel in mind. The Moonflow, for example, manages to be captivating whilst also unsettling.



THE WOMAN IN BLAND

Shutter

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: Canada
PUBLISHER: Cosmic Logic
DEVELOPER: In-House
PRICE: £3.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: AtiRadeon 9500+ or NVIDIA GeForce 6xxx+, DirectX 9, 539 MB disk space
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



If there's one genre in which steam certainly isn't lacking it's survival horror, with countless indie developers hoping their scary effort will gain some YouTube publicity and become the next *Slender*, *P.T.* or *Five Nights At Freddy's*. Indeed, with its length of roughly an hour, *Shutter* almost feels designed with a one-off Let's Play video in mind.

Though its concept borrows heavily from other survival horror games, *Shutter* does at least bring one new idea to the creepy-looking table. Rather than playing as a human, you're instead in control of a small *Wall-E* style robot, using it to inspect an empty house for signs of vandalism. While the house has a number of fixed cameras, the robot is also armed with its own low-res camera, which lets you switch to a first-person perspective, albeit a blurry fish-eyed one.

Initially your role is to use this first-person camera to spot signs of vandalism, take photos of them and upload them to your headquarters, but it soon becomes clear that there are supernatural elements at play. As you play through each of its four chapters your mission then involves taking photos of diary pages scattered around the house, triggering a spooky moment each time you do. At various intervals your robot's camera is also upgraded remotely with new firmware, changing your camera to VGA, HD, night vision and then spectral imaging.

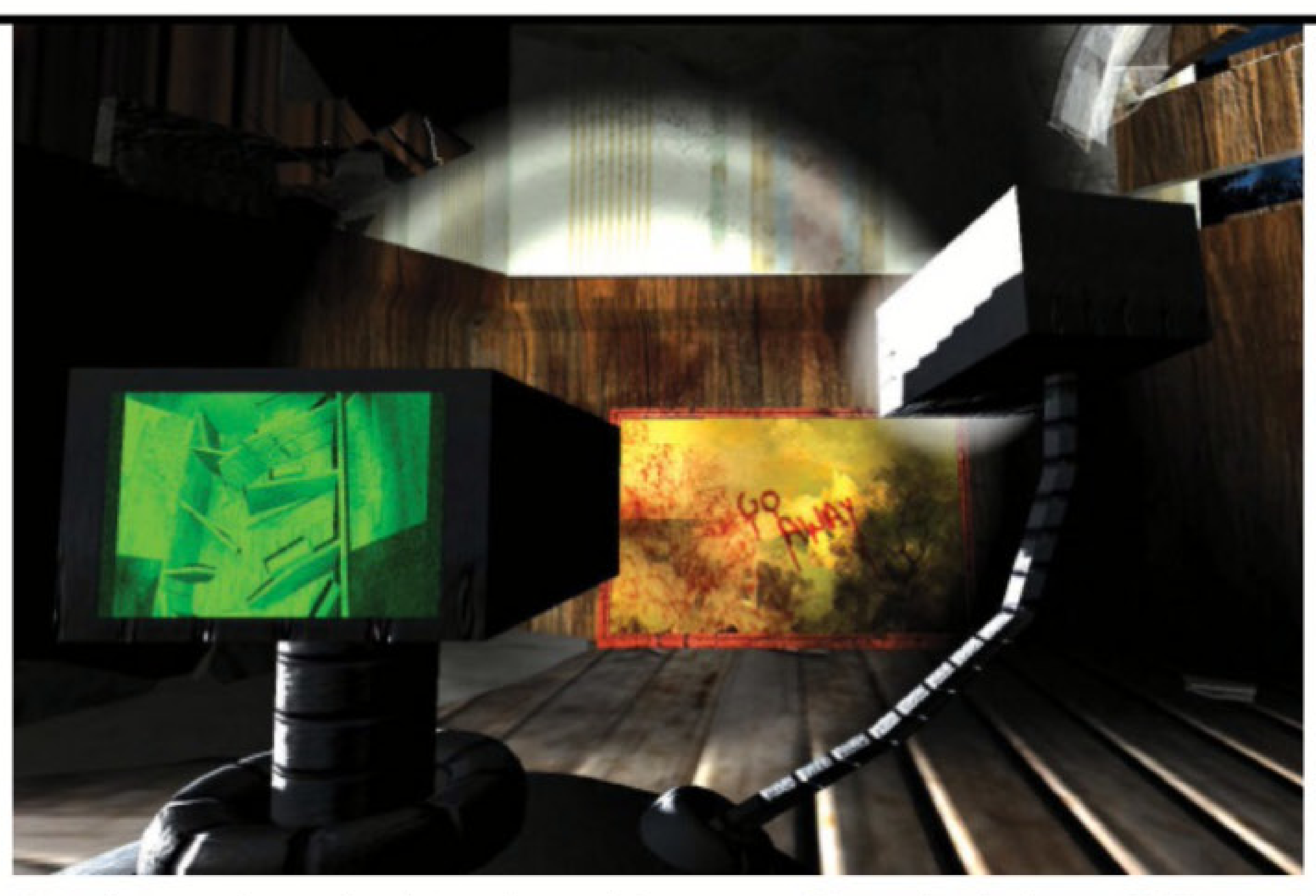
If it were a proof of concept or a demo, *Shutter* would be promising, but as a finished product it feels paltry. Crucially, it somehow manages to feel repetitive despite only taking an hour to beat. The routine soon becomes the same: take a photo of a page on the wall, the ghost does something weird, take a photo of that, move on to the next room, repeat. Even when it breaks from this standard process and tries something different – at one point you have to travel round the house looking for a haunted spade – it ends up repeating exactly the same diversion 20-minutes later.

Cosmic Logic deserves some kudos for attempting something slightly different, even though the use of photography makes it feel a little like *Fatal Frame* with a robot. It does have a couple of decent scares, though these are less effective given the relative lack of danger you feel controlling a robot remotely rather than being in the house yourself. Unfortunately, despite its clever premise it's lacking in execution and duration.

MISSING LINK

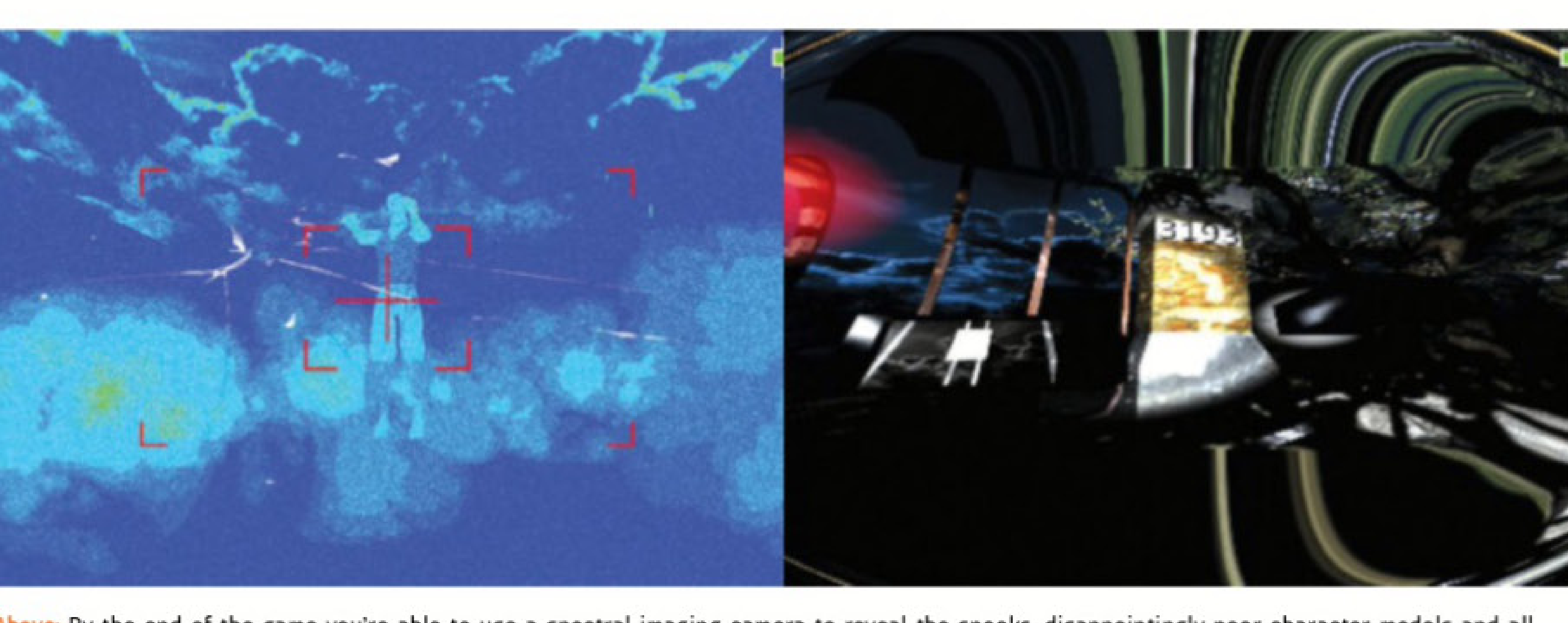
WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

HUMAN AFTER ALL: The epilogue finally puts you in control of a human, but only for two minutes as you experience the same jump scare over and over. Shame it isn't longer and more varied.



Above: When your robot's on-board camera is upgraded to HD you're able to explore the house as if this were a first-person adventure. Its battery is limited though, so you'll have to switch to the fixed cameras to charge it.

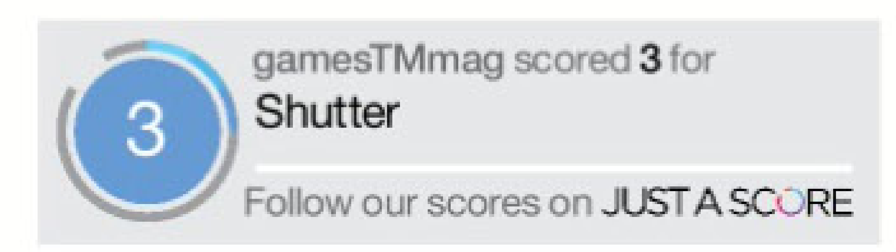




Above: By the end of the game you're able to use a spectral imaging camera to reveal the spooks, disappointingly poor character models and all.

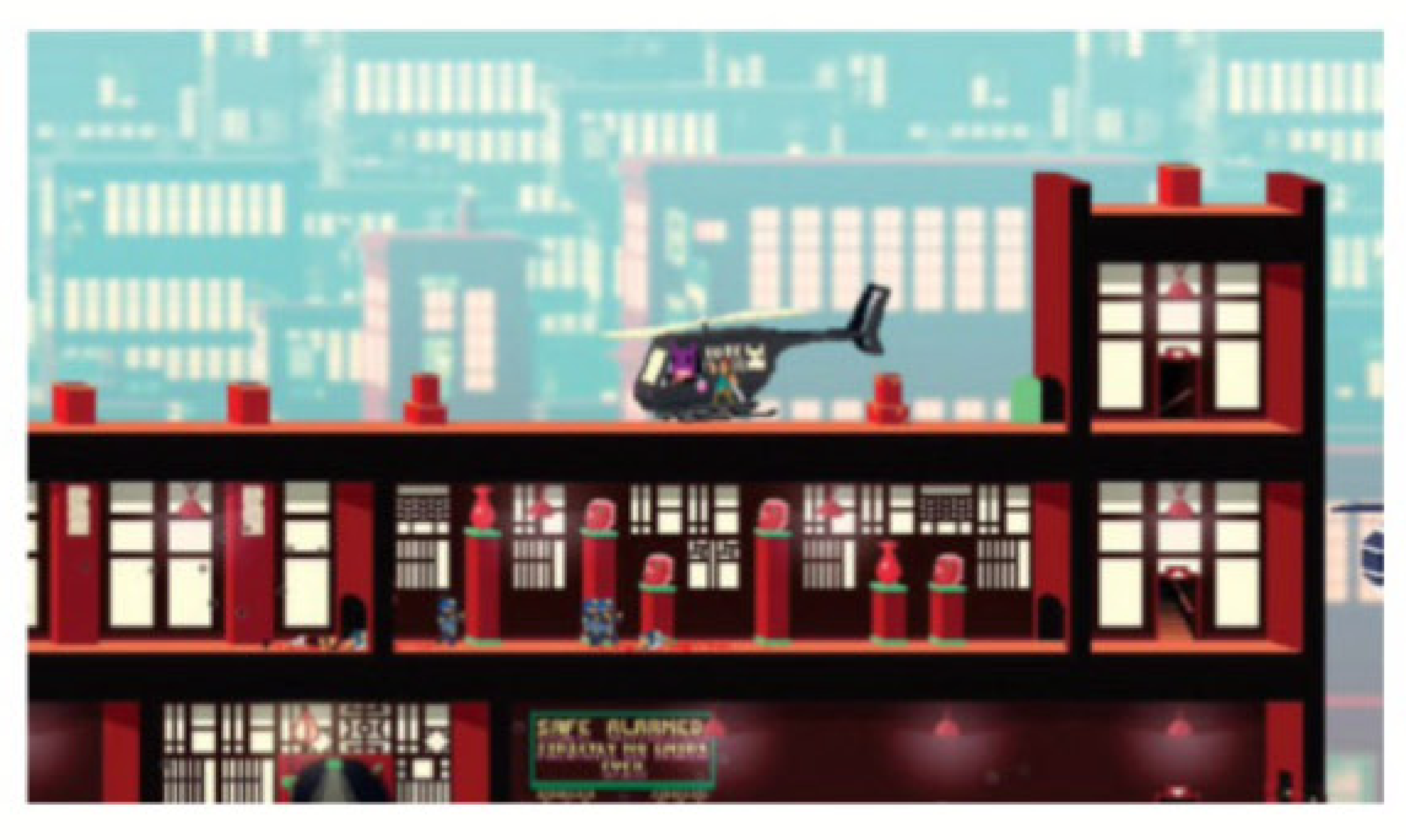


THE SPIRIT MAY BE WILLING BUT THE GAME IS WEAK



PROOF NOT ALL ELECTIONS ARE DEPRESSING

Not A Hero





Above: There's a great quirky humour to BunnyLord, but he doesn't half drag out his dialogue. The gaps between sentences become unbearable, likely leading to you skipping the majority of it. It's a little thing, perhaps, but it is a shame all the same.

There's no hiding what *Not A Hero* wants to be. It's brash, it's silly, it's frenetic – it is what videogames are supposed to be. You play as a freelance anti-hero looking to ply your wares – namely gun-toting and visceral murder – against a selection of criminals to help sway voters towards the purple anthropomorphic rabbit known as BunnyLord. His goal, we're told, is to become the mayor in a short space of time, or the world will meet an untimely and horrific end. As we said, it's very *silly*.

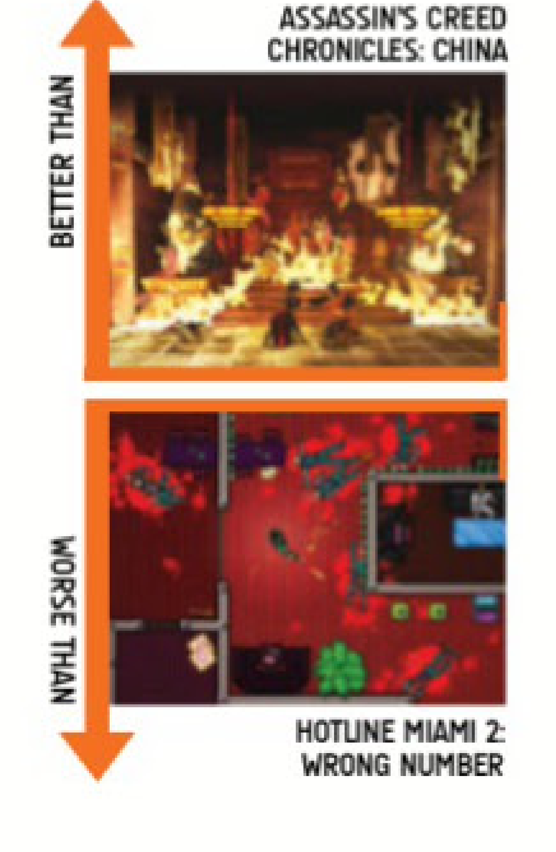
The core gameplay is 2D cover-based combat, rolling and shooting and stabbing increasingly more challenging enemies across a string of different levels. It's as simple as it needs to be, with enough immediate control over everything to better overcome each new stage. There is a set of optional objectives to complete in each stage, some testing your speed, some your skill and others requiring you to hunt down specific (often hidden) items within the stage. In every sense, *Not A Hero* manages to maintain equal amounts of challenging gameplay and irreverence, even if BunnyLord's stuttered and forcibly humorous dialogue does begin to grate.

To help mix up these stages you can unlock playable characters, each styled visually, audially and mechanically on a character trope found in any number of gun-centric movies. There's the run-'n'-gun, dual pistols, door kicker and even the crazed Japanese SMG wielder with a katana. The way they mix up your playstyle is commendable, but sadly futile. In all likelihood you'll find yourself sticking to your preferred character, and though certain skillsets will make optional objectives easier, they are generic enough that they can, mostly, be completed with any of the roster. Ordinarily, that would be preferable, but the gameplay itself never really evolves and, without a mix-up in playstyle, it can leave every stage feeling unfortunately familiar. *Not A Hero* is far too repetitive for a game that should be about eliciting unexpected excitement.

The fact that there are only 21 levels across three themed areas would not, in itself, add to the sense of apathy here, but these stages never offer anything new, don't reward the player for experimenting and don't even give you a score or competitive element to strive for. The underlying controls are fun and fluid, but a lack of variety leaves the game – and therefore its player – wanting.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: PS4, PlayStation Vita
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Digital Devolver
DEVELOPER: Roll7
PRICE: £8.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: GHz CPU, 2GB RAM, 2GB GPU
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



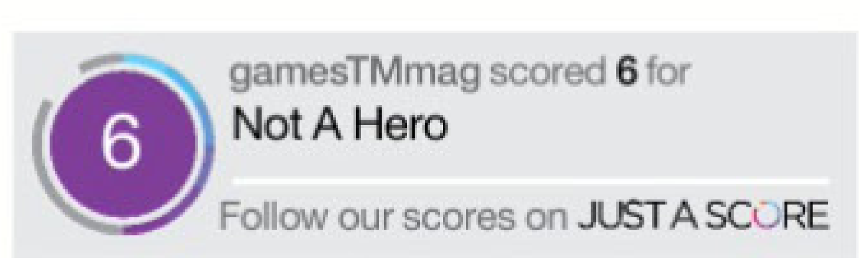
MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

BEAT THIS: A *Hotline Miami*-esque scoring system of style and speed would add immeasurably to *Not A Hero*, giving you a reason to practice each stage until you had mastered it.

VERDICT

SOLID GAMEPLAY BUT NO VARIETY OR REPLAYABILITY



Below: Each of the characters are distinct enough that you'll find your favourite before too long, but with no reason to experiment or replay levels with different characters, it ends up feeling like lost potential more than anything else.







Left: The way the game frames and presents its most tender moments owes a lot to classic cinema theory, and we're glad it blends that with really game-y elements.

Right: It's quickly becoming a running in-joke in the *Life Is Strange* games; how seriously Max takes her food choices...





A FRIEND IN NEED IS A FRIEND INDEED

Life Is Strange, Episode 3: Chaos Theory

The pop culture references that *Life Is Strange* litters itself with should be enough to give away exactly what the game is trying to do; you've got early, and important, references to Ray Bradbury, *Battle Royale*, *1984*, *Weird Science* and *Twin Peaks*. On top of that, characters often refer to Stephen King – this becomes more and more pertinent when you take stock of the sleepy coastal, suburban American town of Arcadia Bay and its domestic dramas... (did somebody say 'Maine'?)

But *Life Is Strange* is more than just a sum of its parts – rather, it's an amalgam that stands on its own in an untapped, fascinating corner of the games industry. Yes, we've had episodic games weave emotional tales before, and yes we've seen time-travel fiction looked at (fairly weakly) in games before. It seems to us that *Life Is Strange* takes what modern TV (*Hannibal*, *True Detective*, *Daredevil*) is doing with pacing and applies it to a game that plays with metaphysical themes – the same sort of treatment you'd see in *BioShock Infinite*.

Though we shouldn't be surprised by now, every time *Life Is Strange* frames a new shot for us, or locks the camera into a voyeuristic angle spying down on your young heroes, we're awed. The level of cinematography is stunning, and makes the most out of that mousy, streaming light that seems to flood Arcadia Bay at every opportunity. The sci-fi leanings of the series, typically contrasted incredibly well with the domestic dramas of the game's college, are starting to find their roots deep in the fibres of the story. This is genre fiction at its height, and we say that with the utmost respect.

We won't spoil the story here – it really is best if you go in knowing *nothing*. *Episode 3* carries on the series' rich tradition of undercutting everything you thought you knew with chaotic, punctuated blasts.

Episode 3 ups the stakes and takes narrative risks that we rarely get to see: it expands the game's universe not only forward, but *outward*... and the very last scene makes you question *every single decision* you've made so far, even down to the random photos you've taken around the Bay. We say that without a hint of hyperbole, without a hint of drama. Chaos theory in action, indeed.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: PC, PS3, Xbox One
ORIGIN: France
PUBLISHER: Square Enix
DEVELOPER: DONTNOD Entertainment
PRICE: £13.99 (Season Pass)
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1

BETTER THAN: LIFE IS STRANGE, EPISODE 1: CHRYSALIS

AS GOOD AS: THE WALKING DEAD, SEASON ONE



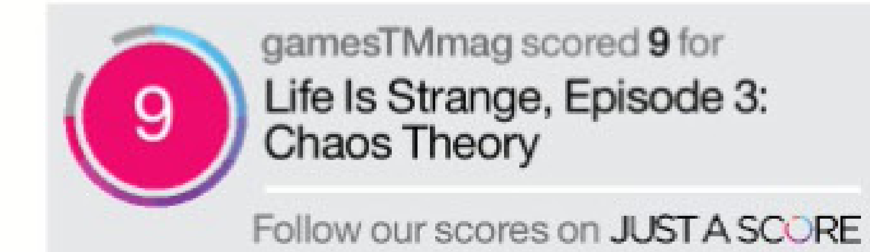
FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

THE BUTTERFLY EFFECT: This game is a lot deeper than you'd think – keep an eye out for the butterfly, as it's more than just an insect; we think it could even be a friend in need...

VERDICT

NAILS THE NARRATIVE AND EPISODIC FORMAT



TO INFINITY AND BEYAWNED

Infinity Runner

Below: Not only is *Infinity Runner*'s story a nonsensical mess of sci-fi clichés with the desperate inclusion of lycanthropy, the credits list a 'Story Development' team of five; as many staff as worked on Quality Assurance.



Few pastimes are as prone to inspiring déjà vu as videogames, but *Infinity Runner*'s pervasive dreariness constantly threatens to turn a simple, forthright genre outing into something that's borderline offensive. Little more than a vapid, crazily repetitive blueprint for its own sequel, *Infinity Runner* is the kind of project that clearly served as an invaluable learning tool for its creators, but paying customers are getting royally stiffed. This is a five-minute demo expanded to more than ten times that.

Between performing the standard tasks of the runner sub-genre – jumping, turning left, turning right – you periodically engage in hand-to-hand combat via quicktime events. With duplicated inputs and (somewhat inexplicably) no sound whatsoever, these 'action' sequences ingeniously manage to strip-mine every possible ounce of excitement from each scenario. *Infinity Runner* also breaks from genre tradition in one utterly baffling area: there are cutscenes and a plot. No game of this nature has ever needed a story, and every single invasive narrative embellishment only serves to make the intriguing central conceit far less interesting than it was in the first place.

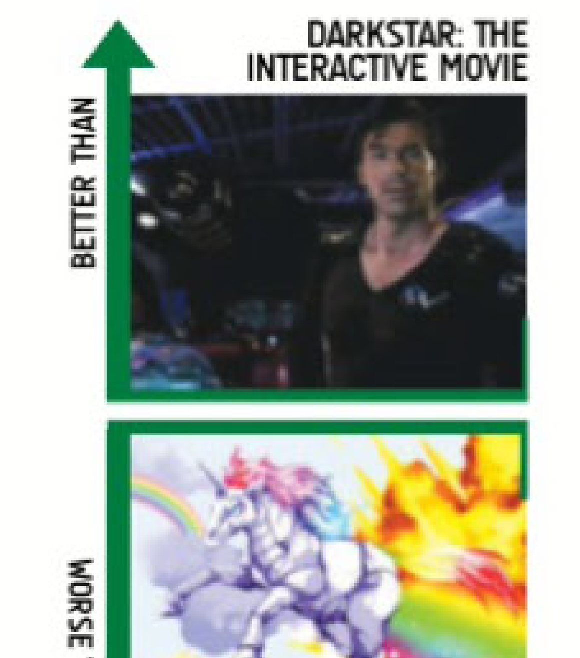
It's no surprise that furiously escaping from the largest starship in the universe isn't improved by ceaseless chatter from a loquacious NPC, but what truly ruins the game is the cavalier attitude towards players' attention spans. Upon starting almost every single level, it's nigh-on impossible to tell if you're tackling a new stage or if you've accidentally hit Retry. Route patterns, quicktime prompts, hazards and animations are repeated shamelessly, and as the final credits roll, you feel as if you've been taken on a protracted, needlessly elaborate tour of a hurried doodle, rather than a thoughtful exploration of gameplay concepts.

Oculus Rift support might've convinced a few VR converts to get involved with the PC version, but the game is a shambles aesthetically. The visuals are perpetually murky and washed-out, and there's barely any sense of attentive design; dim corridors lead to dim rooms that lead to more dim corridors. When you plummet through what appears to be a portal, the blankness, lack of artwork and sudden kinks in the control scheme make it feel as if you've fallen into a glitch. And the less said about the pounding electronic score, the better. *Infinity Runner* could have dazzled as a ten-minute, 69p XBLIG smash-and-grab operation: the kind of game that nobody would ever have played ten times. They say that familiarity breeds contempt, and they weren't wrong.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox One
OTHER FORMATS: Mac, Nintendo Wii U, PC, PS4
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Wales Interactive
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £5.99
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN: DARKSTAR: THE INTERACTIVE MOVIE



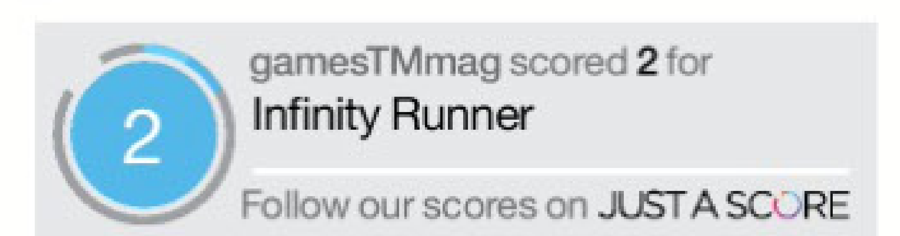
WORSE THAN: ROBOT UNICORN ATTACK

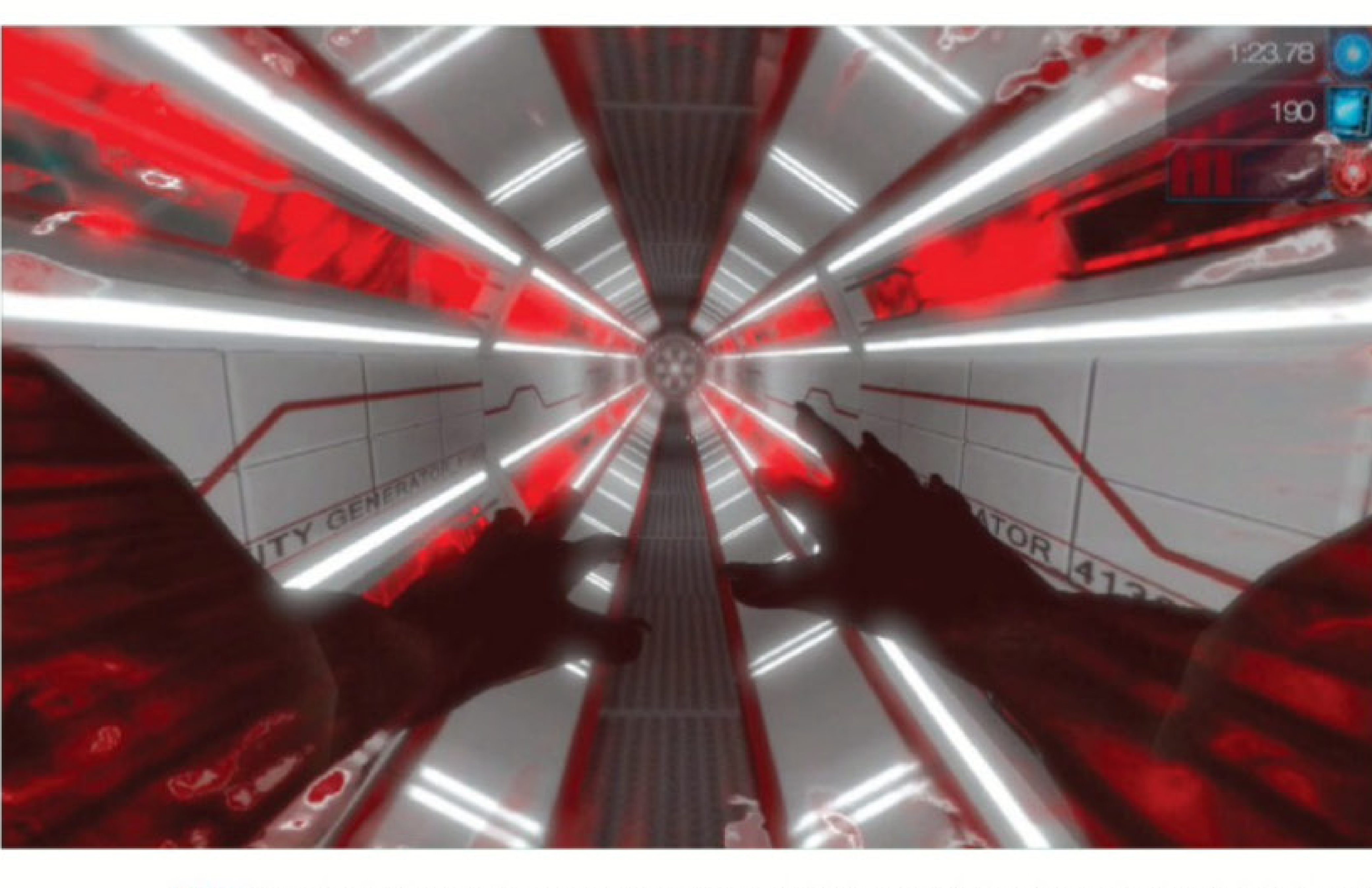
FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

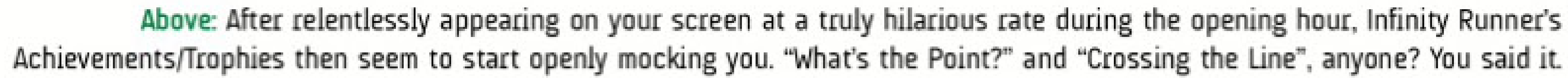
AUTOPILOT: When you turn into a werewolf (as you do occasionally, without warning), combat is performed automatically, giving you even less to do. Blessing or a curse? You decide.











Above: After relentlessly appearing on your screen at a truly hilarious rate during the opening hour, Infinity Runner's Achievements/Trophies then seem to start openly mocking you. "What's the Point?" and "Crossing the Line", anyone? You said it.

Below: Inti Creates, this game's developer, has also worked with the *Mega Man* series as well as assisting in the development of upcoming titles *Mighty No. 9* and *Bloodstained* from the *Castlevania* creator.





RUN AND GUN

Azure Striker Gunvolt

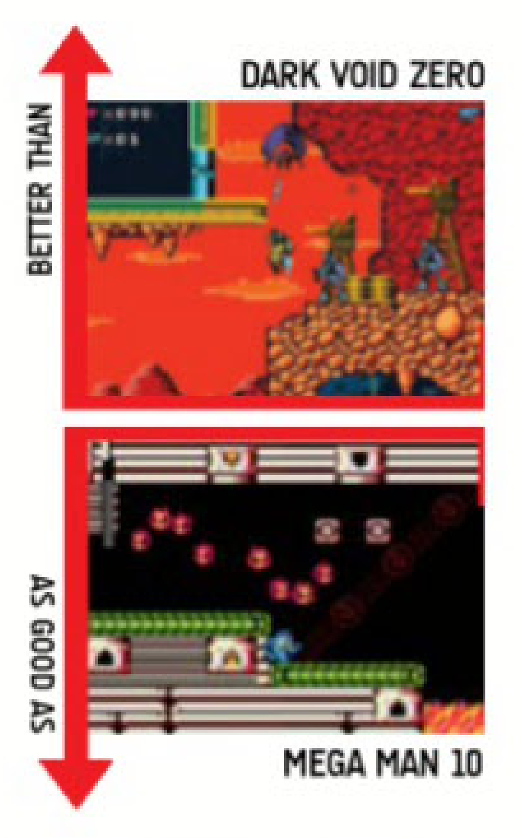
Azure Striker Gunvolt is a great example of a more simplistic style of game making a comeback. The leaps in gaming over the past few decades have been amazing, with worlds being created now that not only take hours to explore, but feature emotive storylines, gripping our minds as well as our hands. Despite all these exciting developments however, titles of this type prove that the old ways are still often the best, mixing modern production with retro cool.

Set in the future, during this 2D, side scrolling platformer you play as the superhuman *Gunvolt*, a boy with the ability to generate electricity. A power you can use for both offensive and defensive means, blasting foes with your Flashfield is your greatest move, one you can perform as long as your electricity bar is charged. As well as this, you can also tag several enemies with special weapon bullets, double jump and unleash unlockable special skills upon your enemies.

DETAILS

FORMAT: 3DS
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Inti Creates
DEVELOPER: In House
PRICE: £12.99
RELEASE: Out Now (Japan: 20/08/2014 /US: 29/08/2014)
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN — DARK VOID ZERO



AS GOOD AS — MEGA MAN 10

Fast paced and continuous, the game's control scheme is relatively simple, jumping, charging your electricity bar, using your Flashfield and shooting being your only real actions. As a result, *Gunvolt*'s limited moves can become fairly repetitive but considering the quickness of the game's tempo, having only a few controls to tap helps to keep up the exhilaration of the action. The aforementioned special skills however, are a welcome addition, these helping to not only break up the gameplay, but aiding in getting you out of peril too.

One of the best aspects about *Azure Striker Gunvolt* is its stage design. From gravitational changes to alterations in light, developers Inti clearly put a lot of thought into each of the game's levels. Another great feature is the design of the end of level bosses, all of which are varied in both moves and characterisation. Like any boss, watching their patterns of attack is the best way to predict and ultimately kill them and while they don't take too much time to defeat, much like the stages themselves, the inclusion of them brings entertaining challenges, as well as definite purpose to your missions.

Full of personality and quick action gameplay, *Azure Striker Gunvolt* doesn't make your blood boil or you mind blow, but it does offer a great time, as well as a chuckle now and again. A stand-alone achievement in its own right, the influence of the developers past titles are plain to see here, but not plain enough that you'll have seen it all before. Making a name for himself, this new blue kid on the block may not have the most experience but he does have some refreshing ideas and with a sequel already having been announced, it looks like he's, thankfully, here to stay. Well worth keeping an eye on.

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

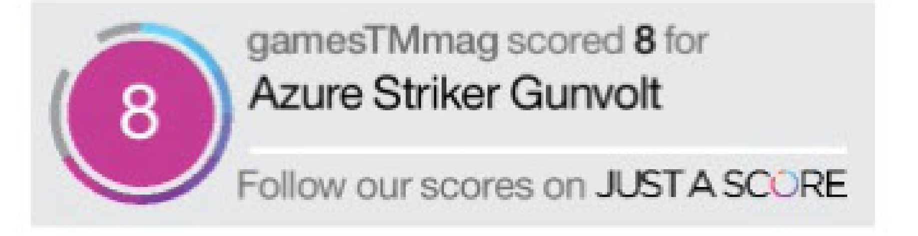
A MUSICAL HELPER: Nicknamed the 'Muse,' your troubled friend Lumen can use the power of song to revive you when you're down, her dulcet tones bringing you back to fight once again.

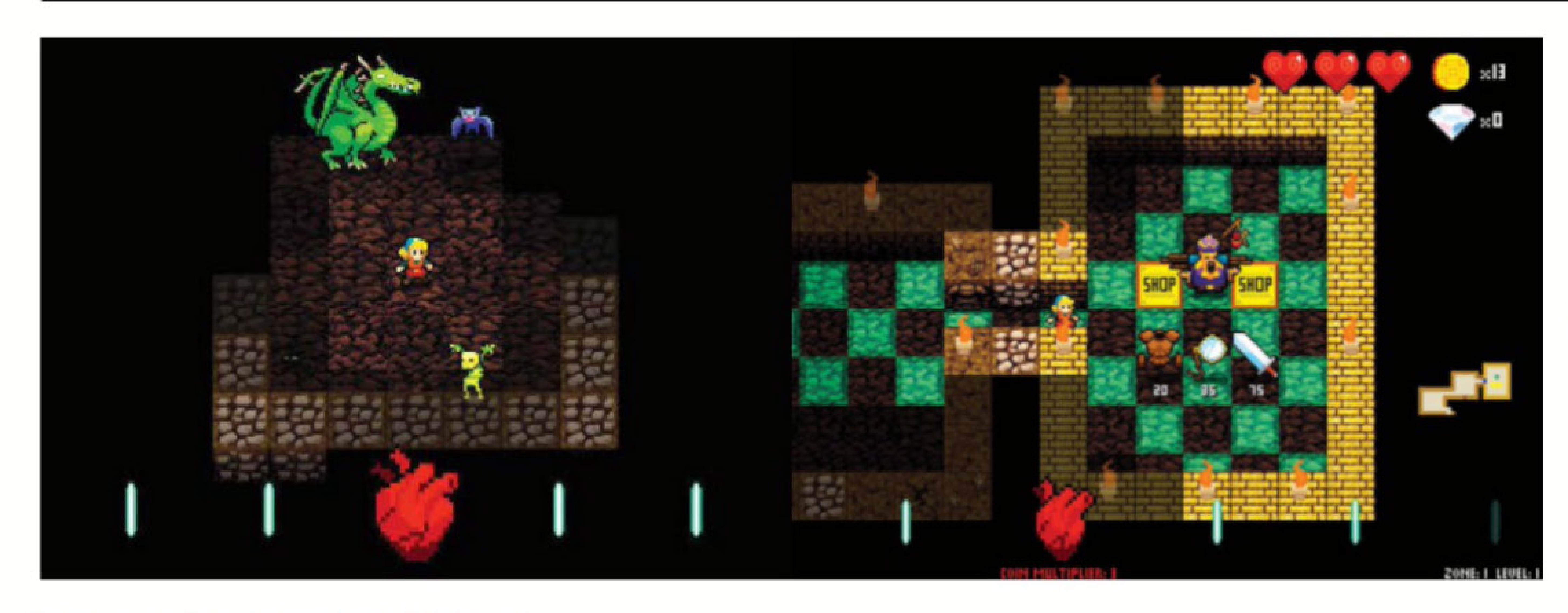




VERDICT

A ELECTRIFYING PLATFORMER NOT TO BE MISSED





Left: Shops are a constant despite the randomly generated levels. Their items are generally pricey, meaning only those who keep their coin combo up, by moving consistently to the beat, will be able to take advantage of the goods on offer.

DANCE DANCE EXPLORATION

Crypt Of The NecroDancer

It's funny how just one gameplay mechanic can completely transform a genre, with past examples including the *Arkham* series' combat system and the ability to rewind time in recent *Prince Of Persia* games. *Crypt Of The NecroDancer* does this with roguelike dungeon-crawling by adding a single element unique to the genre: rhythm-based gameplay.

As in most other roguelikes, you explore randomly generated dungeons, with each step you take counting as a turn in the game and advancing the dungeon's various enemies one step in the process. Traditionally, then, this has meant it's been possible to take a breather and assess your situation, as time essentially stops until you take your next step. Not so here. Instead, your journey through these dungeons is played to the beat of music: either the incredible chiptune score by *Canabalt* and *Super Meat Boy* composer Dannay Baranowsky, or your own custom soundtrack made up of your own MP3s.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: Canada
PUBLISHER: Klei Entertainment
DEVELOPER: Brace Yourself Games
PRICE: £10.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-2
MINIMUM SPEC: Win XP, 2GHz processor, 1.5GB RAM, 1600MB disk space
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes



Each of your steps has to be made to the beat, otherwise it won't count. While this may not seem like such a big deal since standing still remains an option, there are two major motives to keep moving. One, you miss a beat you lose your combo, which prevents you from earning masses of cash from fallen enemies. Two, unlike other games in the genre, standing still doesn't freeze time: all enemies continue to move to the beat of the music.

The result is a complete transformation of a genre that is often accused of being plodding and methodical, instead turning it into something frequently manic and stressful. Although its enemies have rather simple attack patterns and can be defeated in a straightforward manner, this all goes out the window when there's a fast beat forcing you to keep moving. With the added combination of limited energy and a single life, much like in *Spelunky*, you will die regularly, and you will happily choose to start all over again. And again.

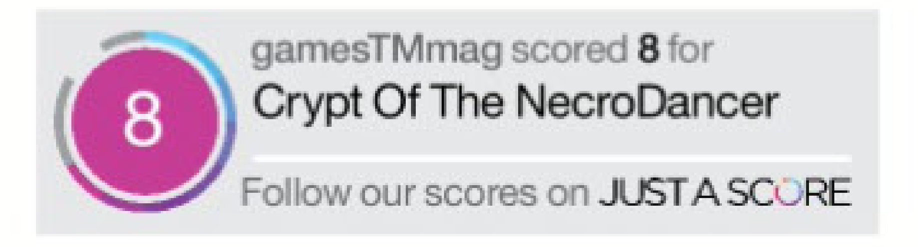
While its stages can look a little dull and low-budget at times, and some of its enemy design is uninspired with blobs, skeletons and dragons, there's still the occasional charming moment, such as the shop owner who can be heard singing as you approach him. The proof is in the playing though, give this lovely new twist on roguelikes a chance, even if you've previously found the genre a chore.

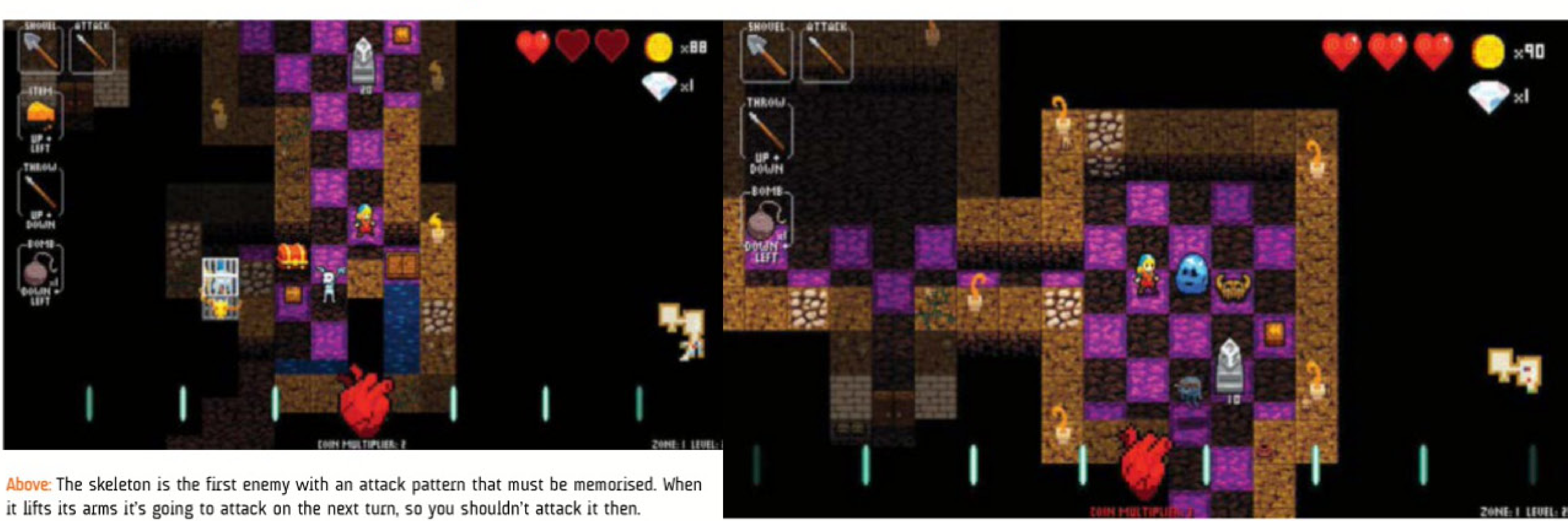
WORLDWIDE
TAKING GAMING ONLINE

DAILY CHALLENGES: Similar to games like *Spelunky* and *OlliOlli*, a Daily Challenge mode presents players with set stages to see who gets the highest score. You only get one shot each day though.

VERDICT

A FANTASTICALLY ADDICTIVE MERGE OF GENRES

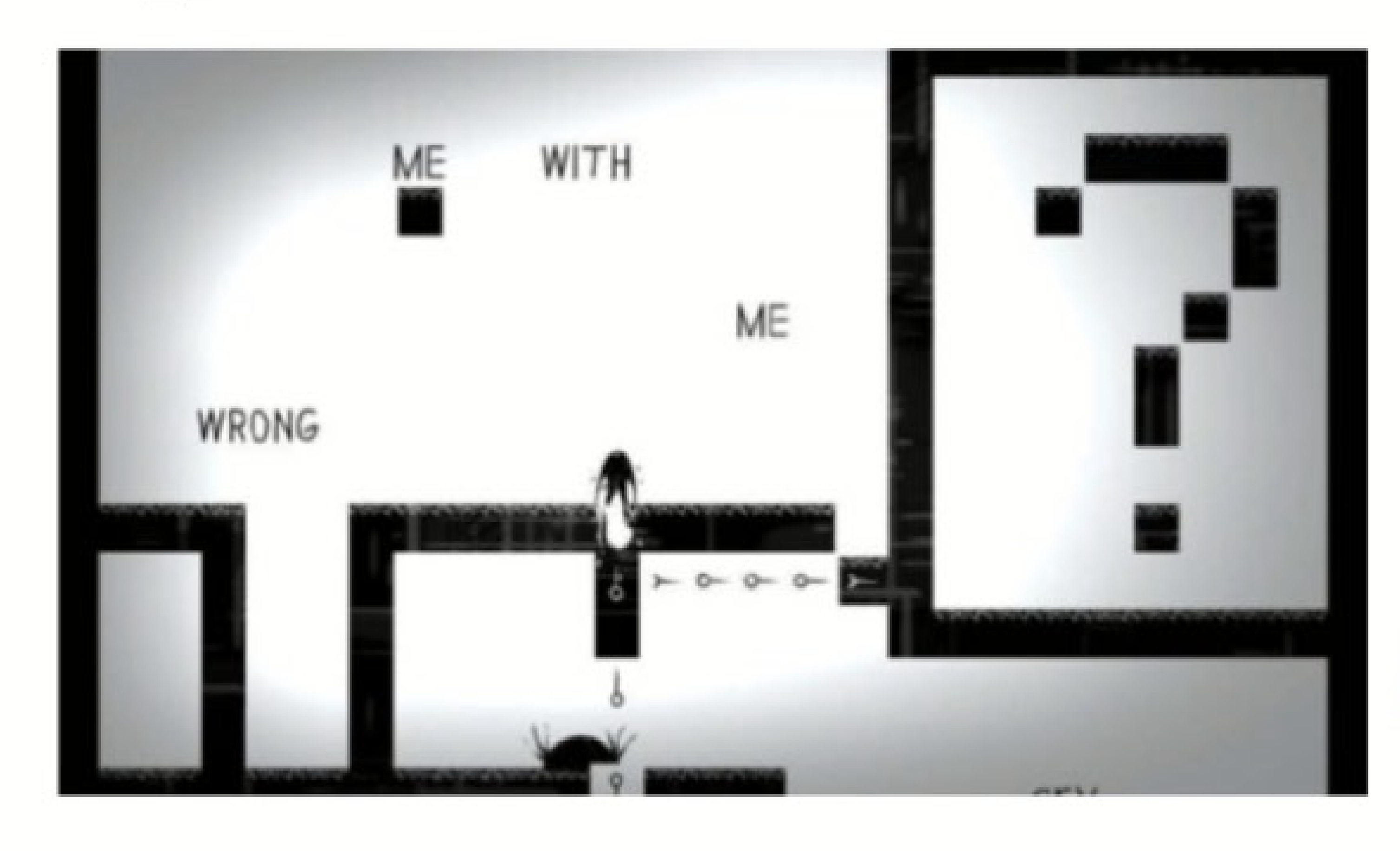




Above: The skeleton is the first enemy with an attack pattern that must be memorised. When it lifts its arms it's going to attack on the next turn, so you shouldn't attack it then.

ARE YOU SITTING UNCOMFORTABLY?

Sym





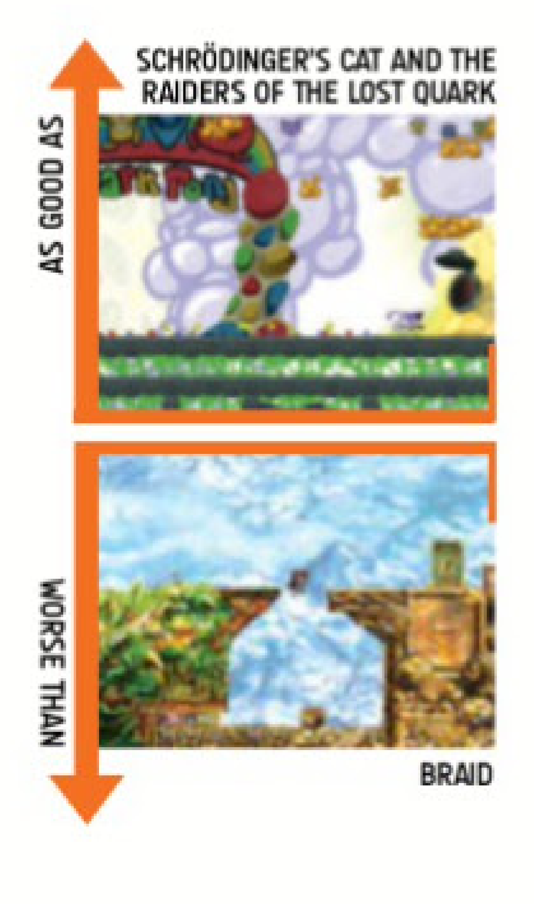
Above: Messages from the protagonist are scattered through the levels, giving you glimpses of an overarching story, albeit in a rather oblique fashion. Many may not have the patience to pay much attention in the end.

You know you're lost in a meta-hole when you wonder if the game is annoying you because it's not that great or because there's supposed to be a message to the annoyance. We quickly found ourselves deep down that hole with *Sym*, a game that purports to express issues of social anxiety disorder and does so with the kind of puzzle platformer that instantly makes you feel ill at ease with your surroundings. The mechanics are smart and offer pleasing challenges, but it's a message and experience hampered by its execution.

The biggest issue is a sense of unfairness that comes from platforming where hit boxes don't feel consistent. How far away, exactly, do we need to be from the spinning blade in order to be safe? How much of a tap on the keyboard is required? It's just not quite precise enough as a platformer to allow you to own your errors. Mistakes can be forgiven so long as we know we made them honestly and the game was punishing us for our stupidity.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: Mac
ORIGIN: Italy
PUBLISHER: Mastertronic
DEVELOPER: Atrax Games
PRICE: £5.59
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: Win XP/ Win 7/Win 8, 2.0 GHz Dual Core Processor, 2 GB RAM, GeForce 8800 or equivalent, DirectX 9.0c, 300 MB available space
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



And *Sym* is deliberately challenging, largely thanks to the light and dark level views that you can flip between. When you flip to the dark world, everything is upside-down and the controls flip. It's a little disorientating and, in later stages as you try to avoid traps, it's tricky. As a mechanic for expressing the trapped, anxious feelings this game wants to explore, it's perfectly pitched, but it almost demands even more refined control to tie it together.

Artistically, it's a triumph. While the black and white indie look may be wearing a little thin for some (we're likely to see some parodies of it soon), the constant motion of the background and creatures in the game, subtly pulsating and bristling, is unnerving. The screen is alive with subtle movement and it makes you wary of every step you take. Again, it pulls you back into that high concept of anxiety rather nicely.

MISSING LINK

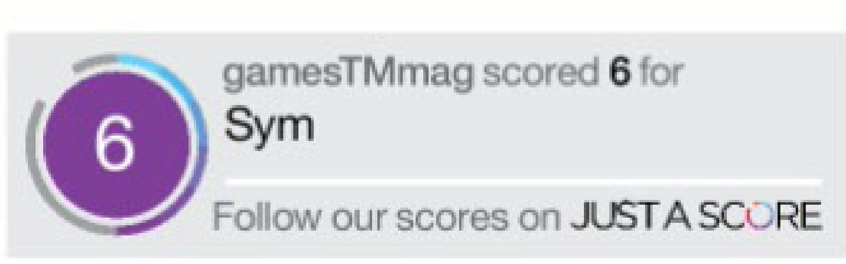
WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

PAD CONTROL: One of the annoyances of the platforming in Sym is that there's currently no gamepad compatibility. Perhaps that would have helped make the controls feel a little tighter.

Sym is a valiant if often flawed effort to tie gaming with an important theme and help promote empathy through experience. It's just that we've had the pleasure of seeing things like this attempted before and with far greater success. As a result there are better puzzle platformers, better socially conscious gaming experiences, and in the case of *Braid*, games that are both. That said, for the money it's a very interesting take on the genre with a captivating style, so if you're willing to look past some of the pitfalls, it's worth your time.

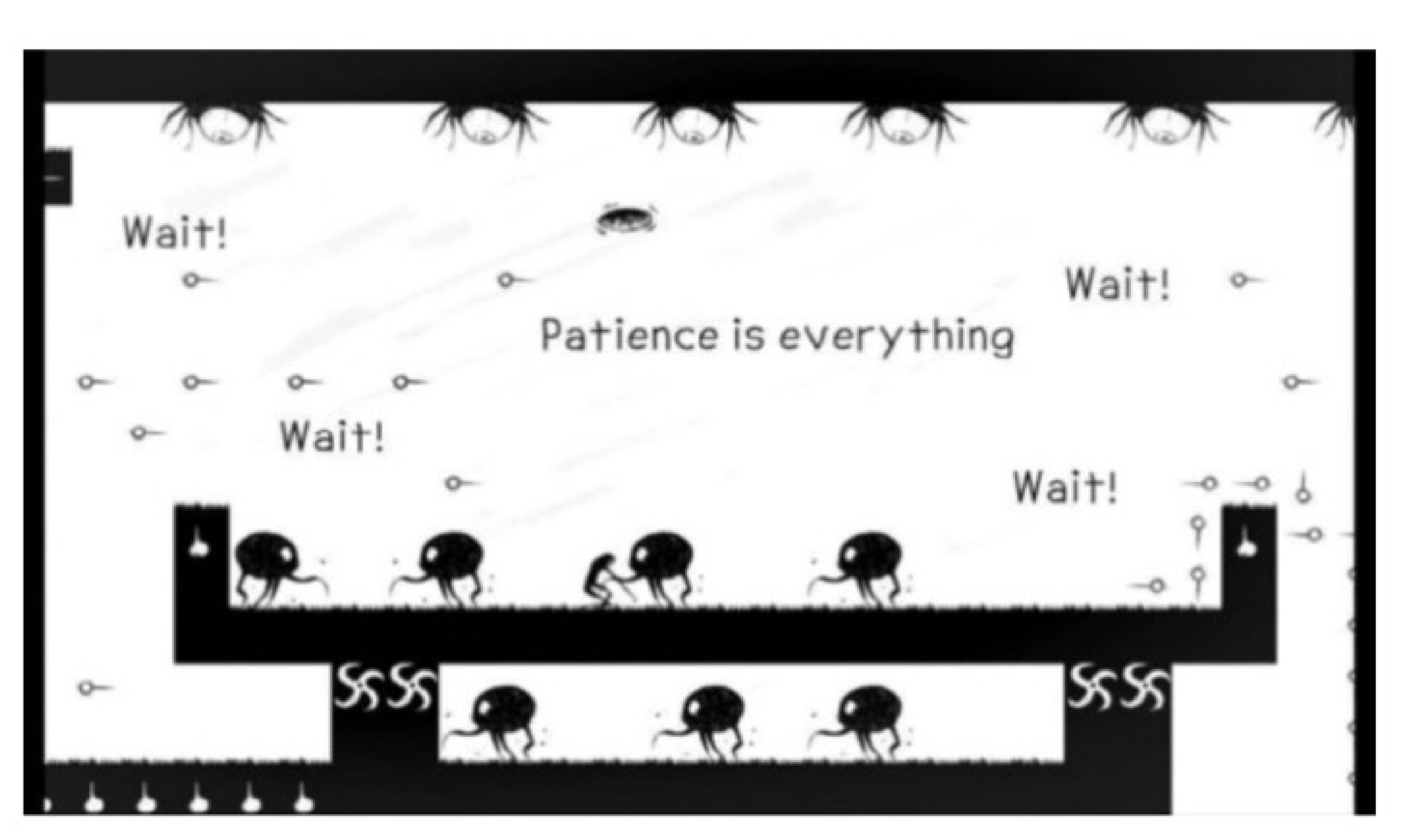
VERDICT

INTERESTING, BUT TOO LOOSE TO BE FULFILLING



Below: The sketch styling and constant movement of the lines of every shape on-screen is quite unsettling, but very interesting. It ties in nicely with the theme of social anxiety.





MORE JACK-OFF THAN JACK-IN

Dex

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: Czech Republic
PUBLISHER: Dreadlocks Ltd
DEVELOPER: In-House
PRICE: £14.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: 1.4 GHz CPU, 1GB RAM, 512MB GPU, 8GB HDD space
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN



AMY

WORSE THAN



SHADOWRUN RETURNS

There's a necessary osmosis to genre hype in any media, and gaming is no different. Cyperpunk was getting a little too big for its own good, what with the success of *Shadowrun Returns* and the muted excitement for *CD Projekt RED's Cyberpunk 2077*, we needed a game like *Dex* to remind us that not all things cyberpunk – or even dystopian future – are a guaranteed success. This isn't a game looking to revolutionise in any way, essentially intending little more than to appeal to genre fans who have admittedly limited options these days. The story is a functional one, if not completely and utterly typical, too. It involves sentient AIs, seedy criminal underworlds and the mysterious and pervasive secret organisation fixated on your player character – named Dex. It's not that the story or its world is unoriginal – the genre itself is pretty much fixed in place with so many mandatory tropes by now it'll likely never offer something new again – it's just that it's told with no real sense of freshness or surprise.

The fact that the gameplay itself provides very little fulfilment means it fails to even utilise the often unique elements of the genre in this aspect. It's a welcome addition that you can pick your own playstyle – be it firearm combat, melee, hacking or bypassing all that entirely through speech and stealth – but the situations are all far too explicit. There's no sense of achievement earned from deciding – and succeeding – to play the game in a particular way, when specifically placed items, obvious safe dialogue options or clearly designed routes through an area signal your available options to you. Combat, too, is lacking, with stunted animations making it much easier to kick-jump your way through the entire game.

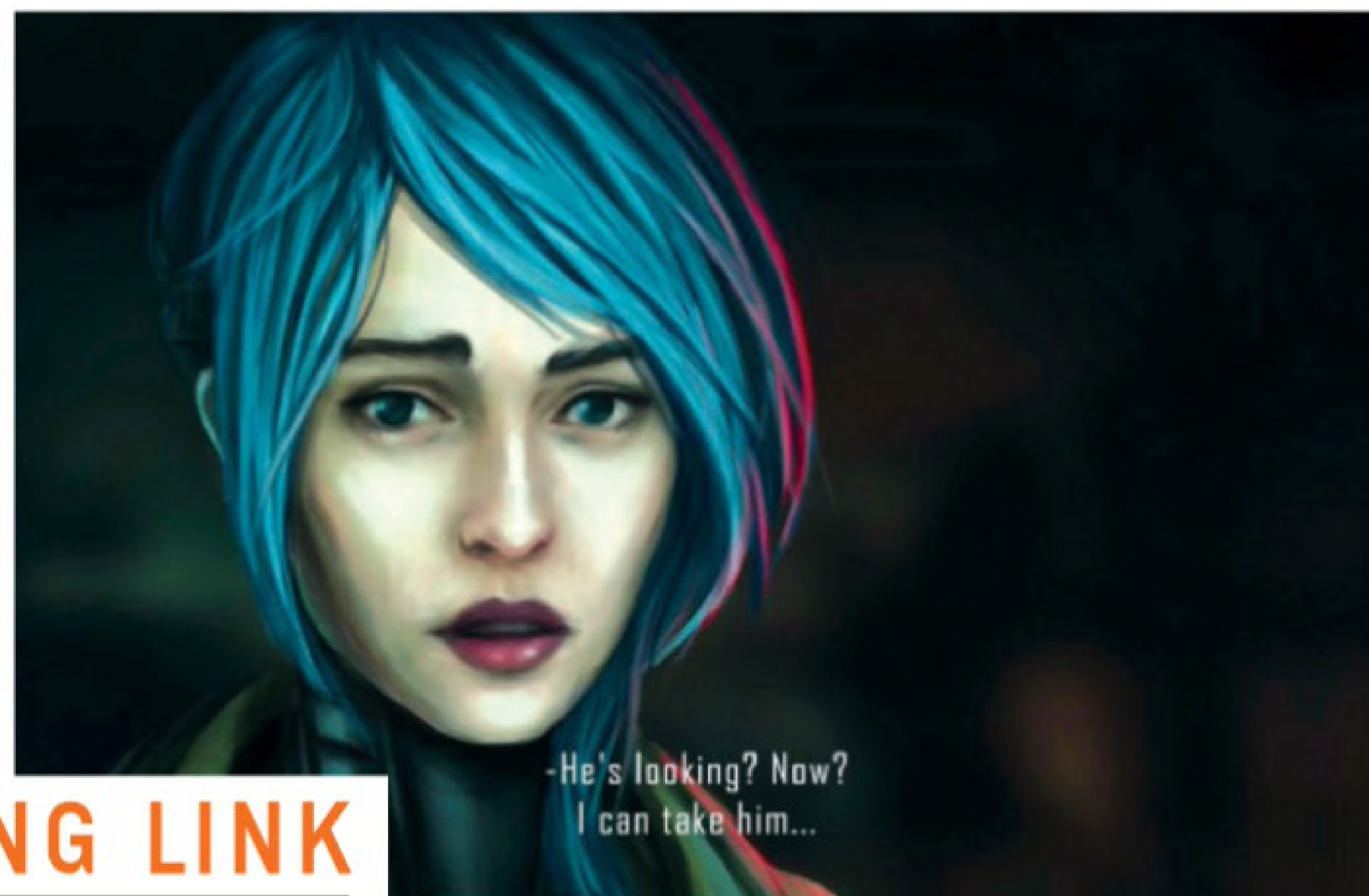
MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

EARLY ACCESS: A lot more work needs to be done to hone every aspect of *Dex*, from cyberspace and combat to even making it a functioning game. A baking period in Early Access might've done wonders.



Above: The cyberspace sections aren't a bad idea, but they are poorly executed. It's a flimsy twin-stick shooter that isn't fun to play, and acts mostly as filler – becoming an irritant.

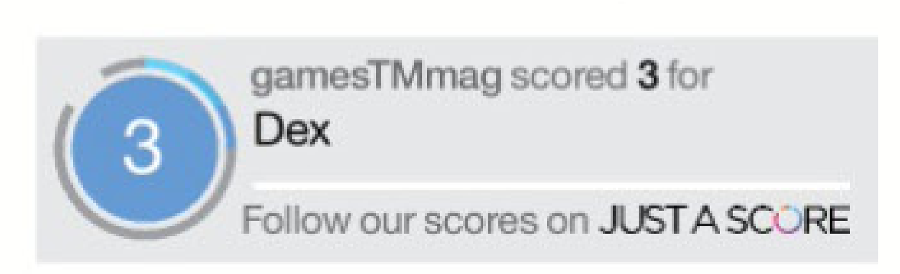


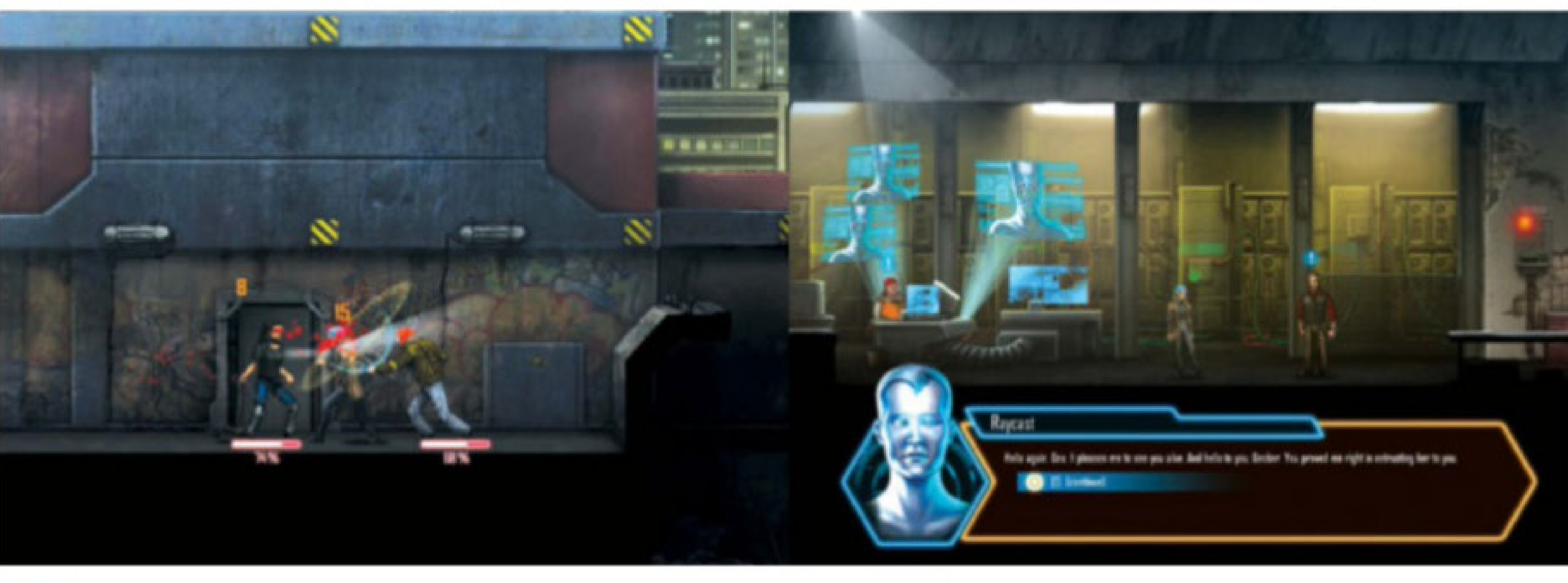
All of that is confounded even more by the fact that this game is really quite buggy. Controller support is erratic, while an enemy combatant's AI routines are so simple they're far too easy to exploit. Among countless issues comes other more crucial faults, such as bugged quests, death during cinematics, fatal crashes and unreliable saving of progress, a cardinal sin for any game. *Dex* just isn't stable enough to recommend, even if a romp through cyberspace and rain-slicked, neon-glowing city streets might have appealed to you. It offers all the right elements that the genre needs, but fails to utilise them in any particularly original, entertaining or – indeed – working state.



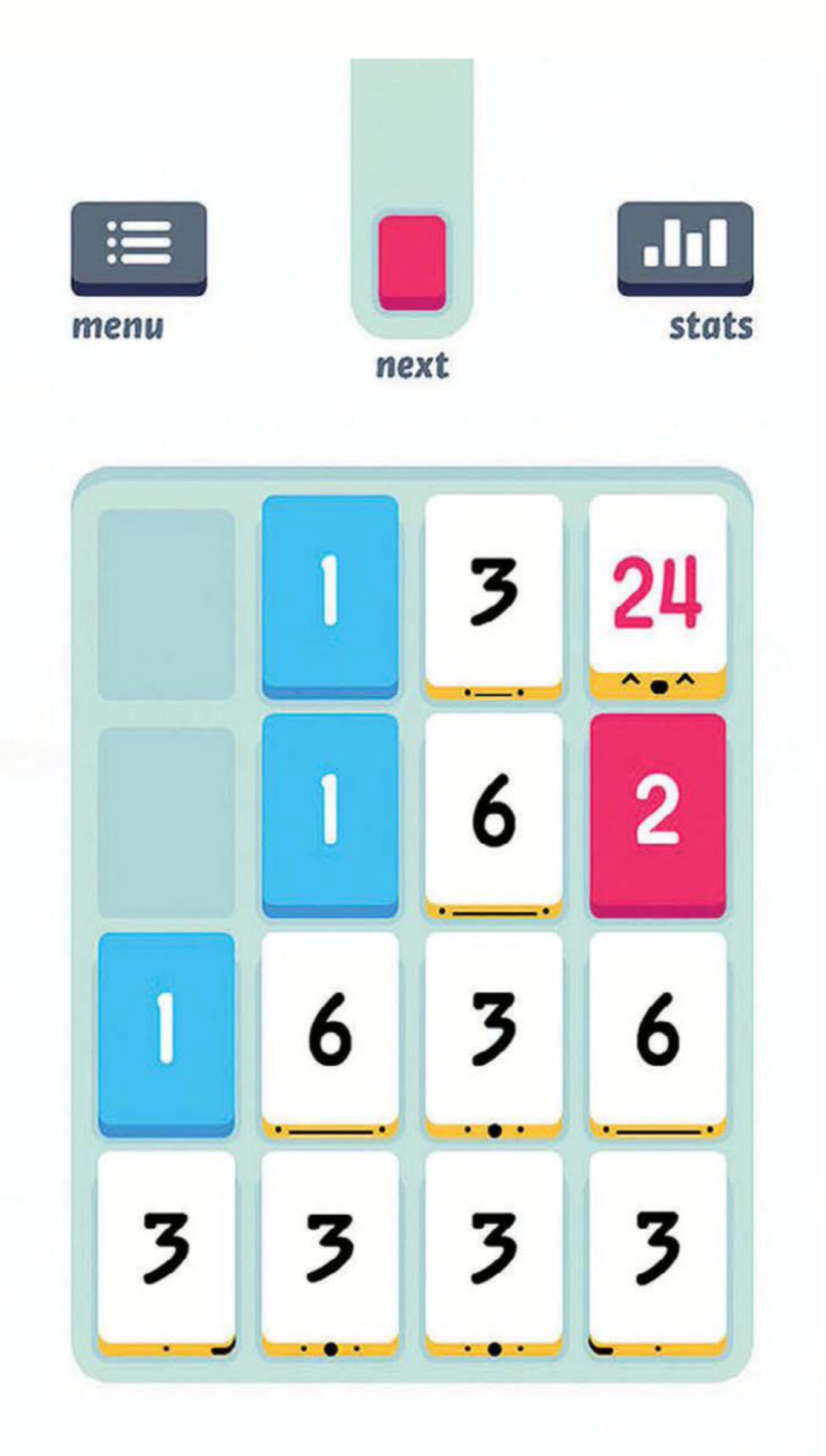
VERDICT

SCRATCHES THAT CYBERPUNK ITCH, BUT NEEDS MORE





Above: The cyberspace sections aren't a bad idea, but they are poorly executed. It's enough to convince you to avoid levelling up hacking at all.



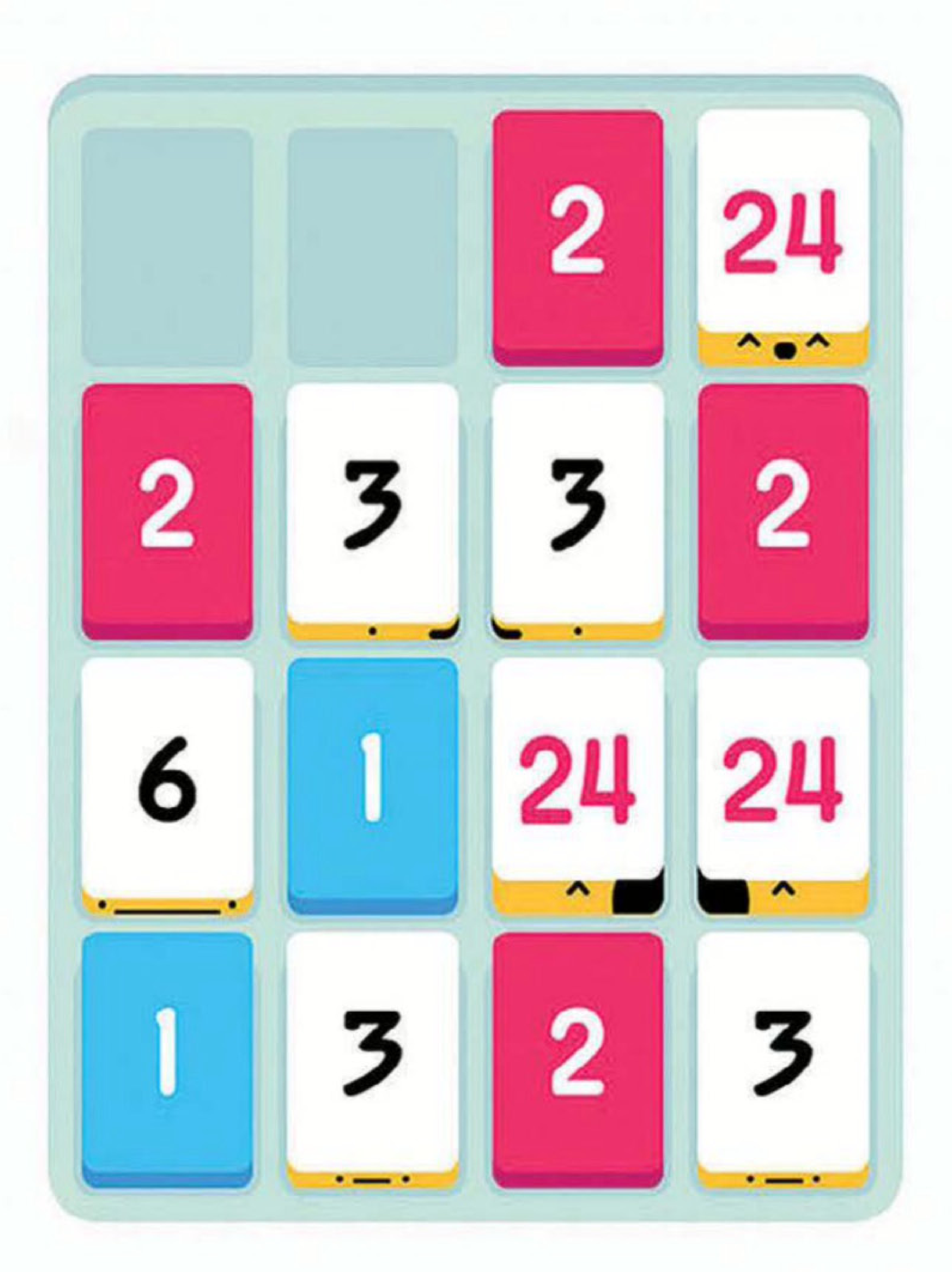
"It's one of those games where I can sit and dream and think and still play it – it's addictive for that, even though I'll always be bad at it"

JESSICA CURRY, STUDIO HEAD/COMPOSER, THE CHINESE ROOM











THREES

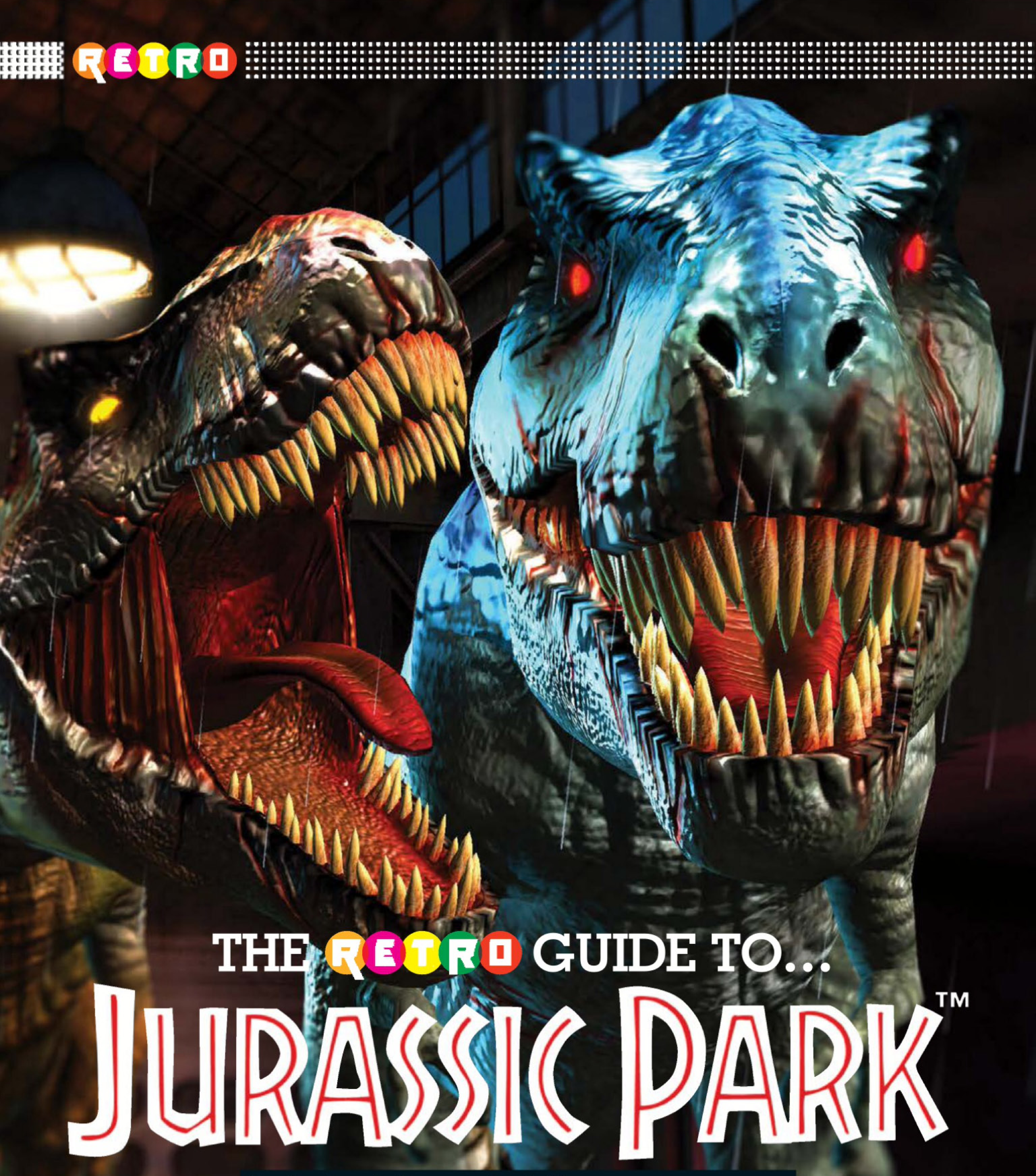
JESSICA CURRY, STUDIO HEAD/ COMPOSER, THE CHINESE ROOM

"I love Threes. *I'm addicted to it, and I'm obsessed by it and I keep playing it even though I'm no good at it. I think Ash [Vollmer], is a fantastic developer and it's one of those games where you think 'I'll just spend a few minutes with this' and 72 hours later, you haven't been to sleep, you haven't been to the toilet, you're in your gamer's nappy, you're hungry, bad tempered… and yet you still have one more go. It's an elegant game, the design of it is lovely, it's beautiful – you know, my 11-year-old can play it, my mother can play it. It's one of those games that's going to be around and loved by people for a long time. It's one of those games where I can sit and dream and think and still play it – it's addictive for that, even though I'll always be bad at it."*

RETRO

NO.162

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THE RETRO GUIDE TO… JURASSIC PARK™

As the fourth Jurassic Park film roars in cinemas, **games™** looks back at the many games that comprise the digital side of the franchise

FILM LICENCES CAN be tricky things to master. Some developers feel that they can release a half-hearted product, safe in the knowledge that fans will buy the game regardless, while others attempt to take the licence in new and exciting directions, directions fitting for a videogame. Needless to say, most licences are a mixed bag, mainly because the games themselves are often handled by multiple developers across several different time periods.

In this respect, *Jurassic Park* is no different and it has its fair share of great and terrible games. You might not realise, however, that among its park simulators, quite a few genres have been explored over the years, from platformers to real-time strategy games. Join us then as we look back at the titles that have spawned from Universal's billion-dollar franchise.

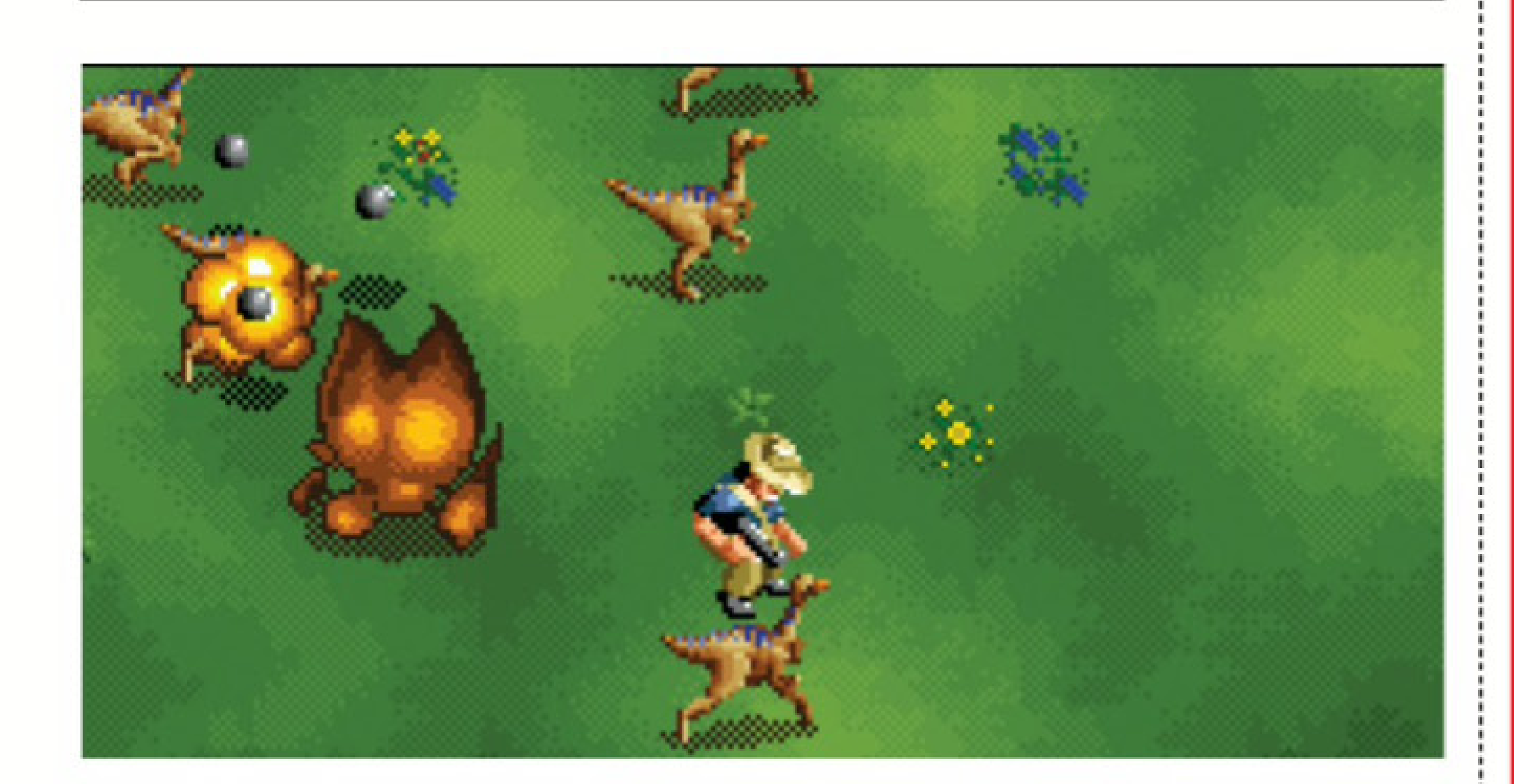




JURASSIC PARK 1993

NES/GAME BOY

Ocean Software was the king of movie conversions, so it should come as no surprise to learn it secured the coveted licence for Nintendo and home computer systems. Cleverly, it tailored the games around each system, so the NES and Game Boy outings are enjoyable top-down shooters split into standalone levels, while the others are distinctly different. Alan Grant must run around the park shooting or collecting eggs, which will then turn into access cards (don't ask). He's then able to access buildings and interact with the various park terminals. The Game Boy version follows the same principles, but is greatly cut down in size.



JURASSIC PARK 1993

SNES

The SNES version utilises the same top-down view as its eight-bit cousins but is a slightly slower-paced game with a greater emphasis on exploration and a huge open world. It also zooms in on the screen a little more, which can occasionally make it hard to avoid enemies. A few puzzles have been thrown into the mix, but they're relatively easy, requiring little effort to solve. Much harder is avoiding the solid array of enemies that range from the ever-dangerous raptors, to giant dragonflies and the T-Rex. Perhaps the biggest and best change is found with the new mode 7 sections, which switches the action to 3D whenever you explore the game's facilities.



JURASSIC PARK 1993

AMIGA/PC

The home computer versions play like a cross between Ocean's console games. It has more elaborate puzzles than the SNES game, dingier visuals (that suit the oppressive atmosphere quite well) and several new dinosaurs. The AGA version is the best Amiga outing thanks to smoother visuals in the 3D sections.



A QUICK INTERVIEW WITH GARY BRACEY

Ocean's manager on going after Jurassic Park

Why were different versions made for different systems?
We wanted to have a *Doom*-style section in the game, but a number of the systems weren't technically capable, so we tried to make appropriate levels for the relevant platforms.

How difficult was the licence to secure in comparison with other films?
Not too difficult. Ocean already had commercial credibility in Hollywood so they were happy for us to bid for the game rights… and we paid a shitload of money for them. I think it was the first million-dollar (advance) game licence but we were so confident of the film's potential success it was a calculated gamble. We also met with Spielberg himself as I think he wanted reassurance that the company would do creative justice to the IP. That was a fun meeting!

Why do some games share plot points with the book?
I don't recall exactly which parts you're referring to, but if we found something in the book that we felt would make a good game mechanic, we used it.

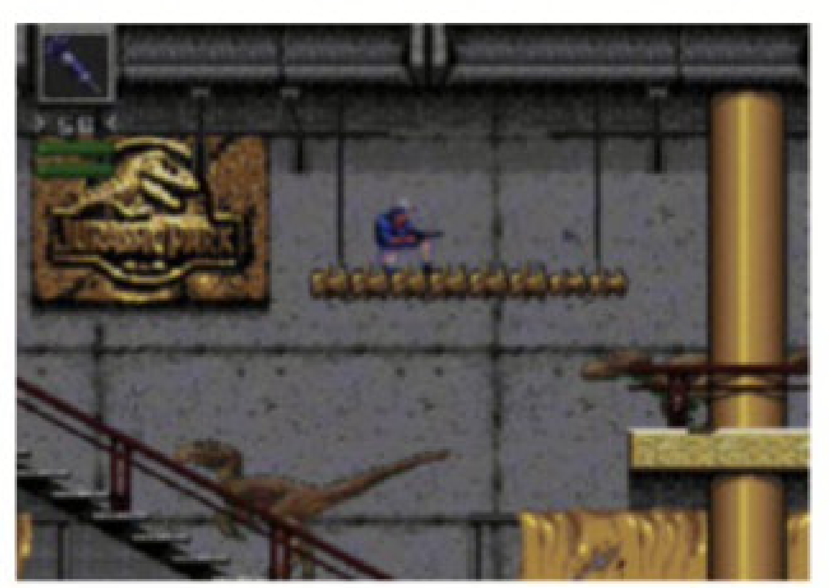
How successful was the game in the end?
Enormously. I don't know how entirely happy we all were with the game itself but the company had made such a significant investment in the licence that it just had to be released to tie in with the movie launch, hence we had the usual narrow development time and inevitable crunch period. If we had been given another six months it could have been amazing. Still, not bad.

JURASSIC PARK 1993

MEGA DRIVE

Sega won the licence for its home systems and again made different versions that played to the strengths of each console. The Mega Drive version is particularly intriguing as it's effectively two games in one. One half sees you playing Alan Grant, the other, a hungry raptor. While both use plenty of platforming, the raptor section has a focus on combat, while Grant must rely on some underpowered weapons. It looks a little dowdy, but it proves surprisingly entertaining, if a little hard in places.



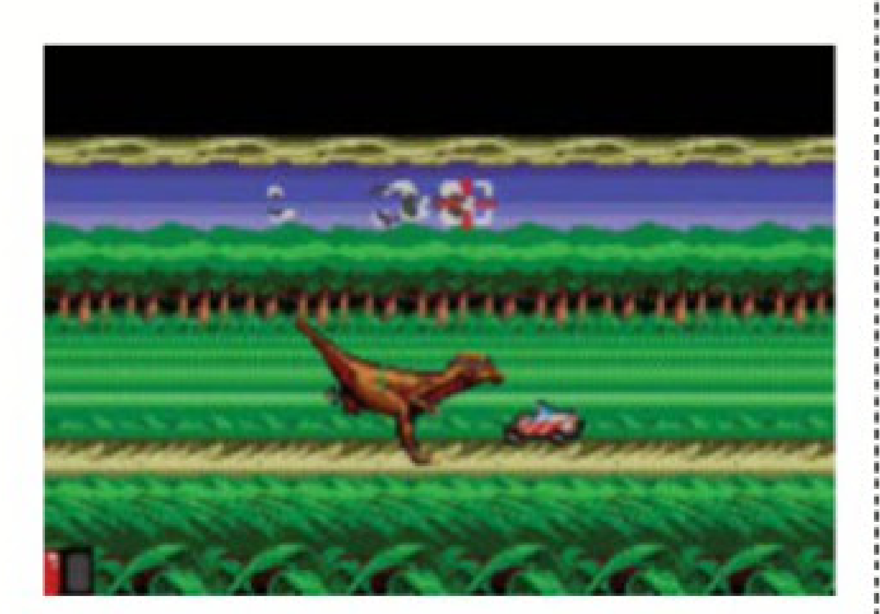


JURASSIC PARK 1993

MASTER SYSTEM/GAME GEAR

Sega's eight-bit versions allow you to tackle levels however you wish and typically comprise of two parts. The first has you in a Jeep, shooting down enemies with an on-screen cursor, while the second half is more run-and-gun based, with Alan Grant racing through the stages. It's pretty tough at times but the solid level design and interesting range of dinos ensures you'll fight on until the end.







JURASSIC PARK 1993

MEGA-CD

This is arguably Sega's best home conversion of the hit licence. It takes the form of an engrossing point-and-click adventure that proves you don't need spills and thrills to create an engrossing game. As with previous games you're hunting for dinosaur eggs, but there are far more puzzle elements to be found. You have panoramic views of the island and multiple paths are available, meaning it's easy to get lost. Everything takes place against a strict 11-hour time limit, which adds to the general tension and provides an interesting change of pace for Sega's quirky adventure.

JURASSIC PARK 1994

ARCADE

Sega's arcade game shares very little in common with its movie namesake, but that doesn't really matter. It starts off with a thrilling chase that has you pursued by the T-Rex and doesn't let up for the rest of its running time. Along the way you'll fend off hordes off rampaging dinosaurs, tear through all manner of different environments and even race along the back of a brachiosaur. It's an insane, ridiculous treat that impresses with beautifully drawn dinosaurs and plenty of variety. The lack of weapons is a disappointment, and the choice of a joystick over a more traditional lightgun seems odd, but you'll be having so much fun it doesn't really matter.

> "EVERYTHING TAKES PLACE AGAINST A STRICT 11-HOUR TIME LIMIT"

JURASSIC PARK 2: THE CHAOS CONTINUES 1994

SNES

Ocean's sequel has nothing to do with either movie and takes the form of a *Contra*-styled run-and-gun. Sadly, while it allows you to tackle levels in any order and caters for two players (complete with a clever health sharing mechanic) it's too difficult for its own good.





JURASSIC PARK 2: THE CHAOS CONTINUES 1994

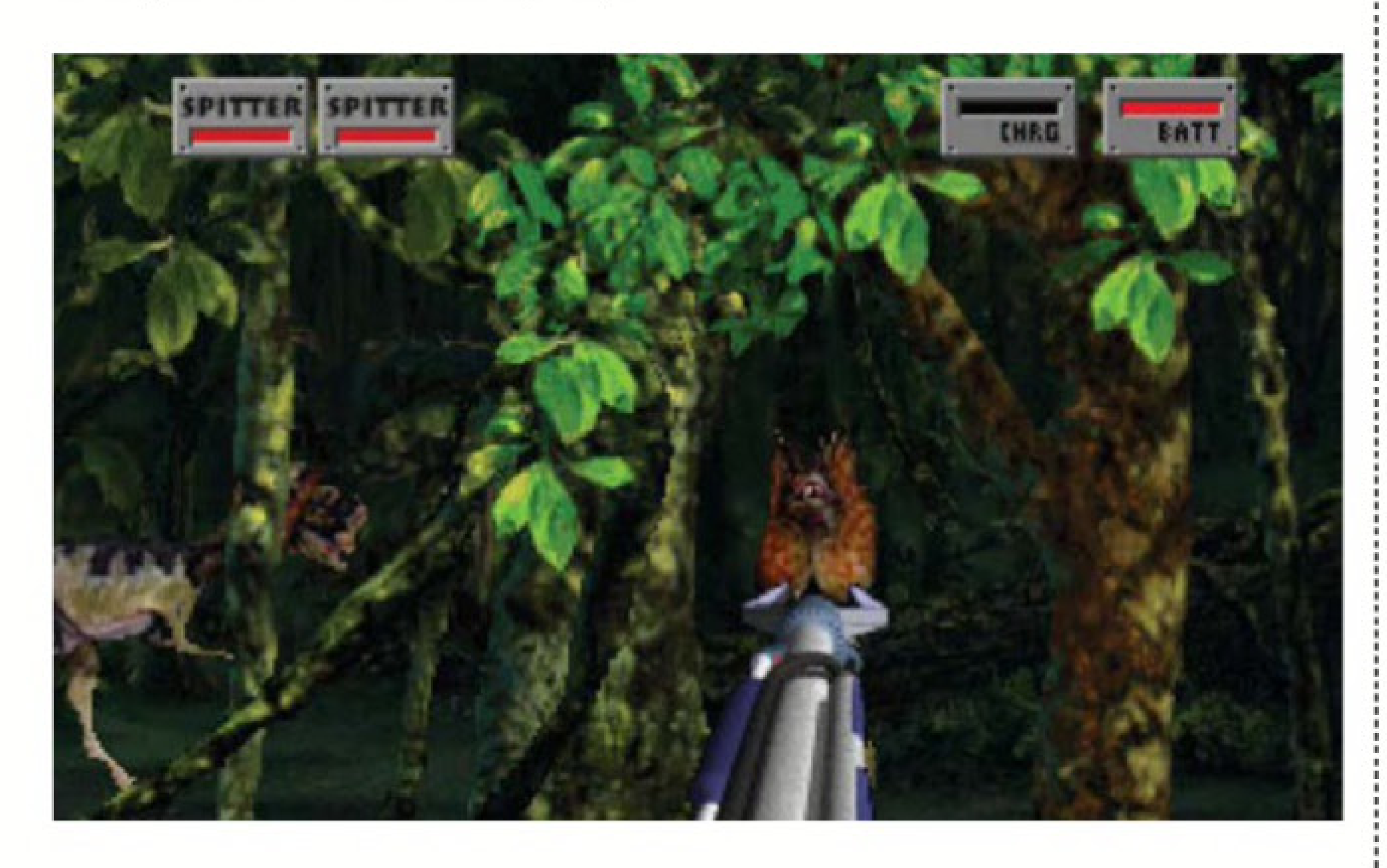
GAME BOY

Ocean's handheld outing is far more successful. It's another run-and-gun but with far more interesting mechanics (you can swim for starters) and cute stylised visuals. Keys must be collected before you can leave a level, and as the game progresses the stage layouts get ever more complex. Highly recommended, although it's now hard to find.

JURASSIC PARK INTERACTIVE 1994

3DO

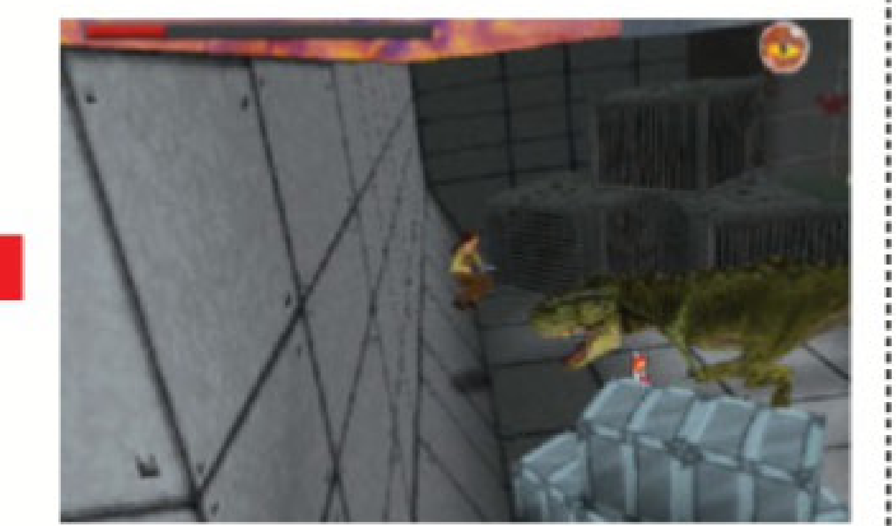
Originally planned as a 3DO launch title, *Jurassic Park Interactive* is a rather simple selection of mini-games that mainly revolve around you running away from the T-Rex or taking out dinos with a taser. Ultimately you're trying to ensure as many survivors reach an available heliport as possible, but the bland gameplay and simple mechanics will most likely send you into a state of torpidity.



THE LOST WORLD: JURASSIC PARK 1997

PLAYSTATION/SATURN

Like Sega's earlier Mega Drive game, *The Lost World* switches between dinosaur and human protagonists. There are a choice of five this time, all of which play differently to each other. While the gameplay is inventive, the stodgy controls and high difficulty factor are off-putting. We'd recommend seeking out the PlayStation's *Greatest Hits* version instead, as changes were made, resulting in a more enjoyable adventure.





THE LOST WORLD: JURASSIC PARK 1997

MEGA DRIVE

Initially this second game from Appaloosa fails to improve due to some extremely bland overhead run-and-gun sections. Stick with it however, as there are several technically impressive mini-games to be found that range from capturing dinosaurs with tranquilisers and frantic motorcycle chases, to fending off attacks while floating downriver on a raft. Appaloosa clearly put some thought into its adventure and its late release makes for one very technically impressive Mega Drive game.



A QUICK INTERVIEW WITH BILL HARBISON

Ocean's graphic artist revisits Jurassic Park and the process of turning a classic movie into a game





Was there much excitement knowing Ocean had secured the licence?

Ocean acquired the licence for *Jurassic Park* when it was still a novel before it was announced that it was going to be a Steven Spielberg movie. This is when the anticipation began to grow. Soon we started to receive a lot of production material to help with the game design: synopsis, costume design photographs, and dinosaur concept sketches.

How did you know what dinosaurs to use in the game?

The sketches we were sent were concepts for the dinosaurs that would be featured in the movie so we could draw them as sprites in the game. We also got photographs of the sick triceratops from the movie, which I used to create the background element in the game.

Why do you think the movie was so popular?

There was a massive hype machine behind *Jurassic Park*. The studio knew they had something revolutionary on their hands and put a huge amount of money into merchandising. The extent of the merchandising wasn't clear until we were sent a video, which was sent to all the companies who were involved. It was basically a showreel for all the *Jurassic Park* products that were going to be released and it was clear you would not be able to move without seeing something with *Jurassic Park* on it.

How difficult was it to create the 3D sections?

I wasn't involved in the 3D section but I did witness the dinosaurs being animated for this section of the game. Ocean had employed some animators from Cosgrove Hall who had worked on *Dangermouse* and *Count Duckula*. This was another humbling experience because Craig Whittle, Helen Smith and Mark Povey could really do animation and their skills were above and beyond ours in the games industry. I learnt a lot from those guys.



THE LOST WORLD: JURASSIC PARK 1997

GAME GEAR

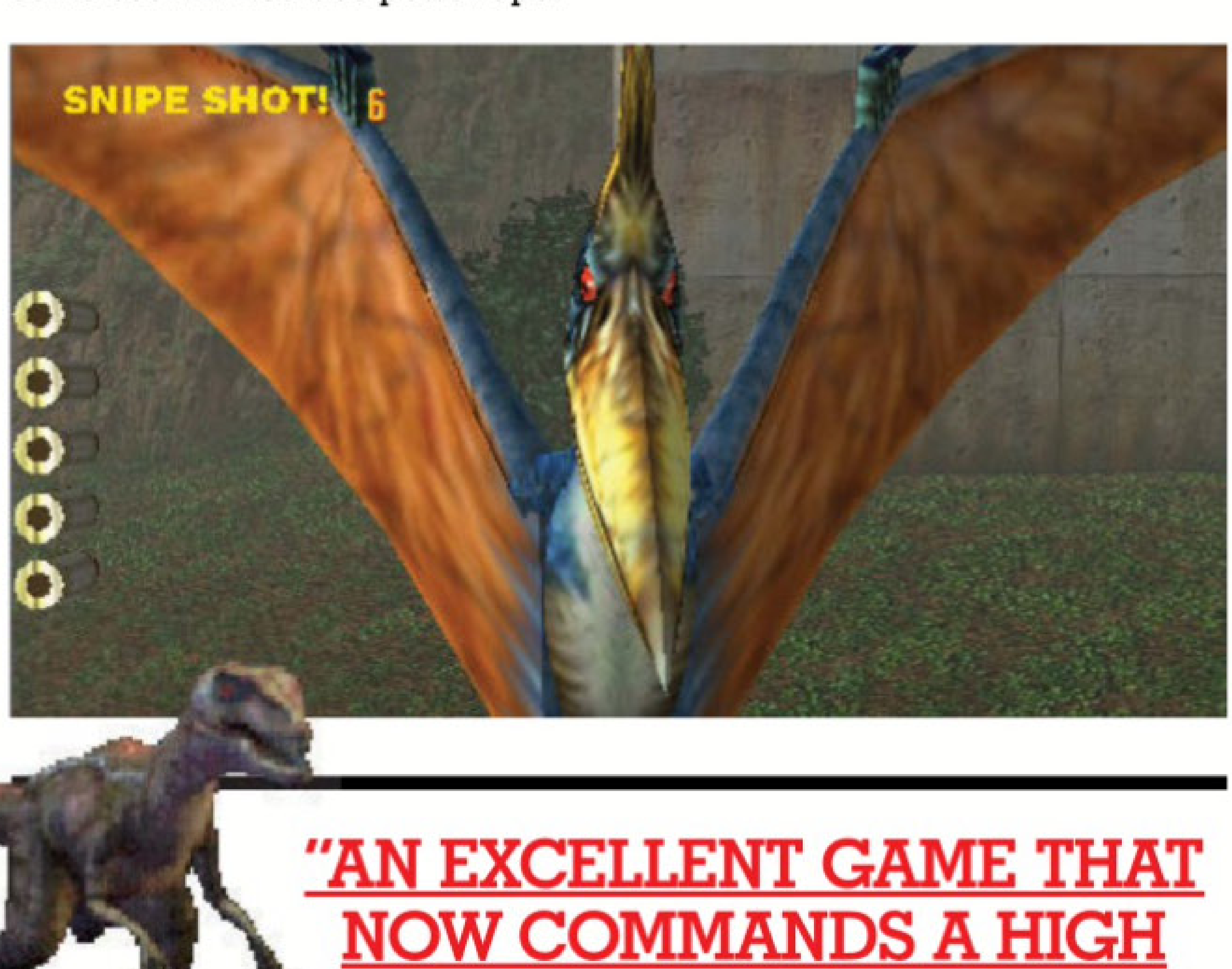


Many won't have played this Game Gear exclusive as it was only released in the States. Like several of the later *Jurassic Park* games, it's a straightforward run-and-gun, but with a more basic set of weapons. There are some nice touches, like being able to tackle levels in different order, which add a nice aesthetic, but it's otherwise pretty forgettable stuff.

THE LOST WORLD: JURASSIC PARK 1997

ARCADE

Interestingly, two versions of this game exist. The first features a carnotaurus that was originally due to appear in the film and was quite different to the movie. The large cabinet used for it was also relatively basic due to time constraints. A later version released in 1998 changed the level layouts, replaced the carnotaurus section with a new rampaging T-Rex in a city and added upgrades to the cabinet, including blasts of air to simulate the roar of a T-Rex. Regardless of which version you play, they're both excellent lightgun games that feature simultaneous play and some cool limited-use power-ups.

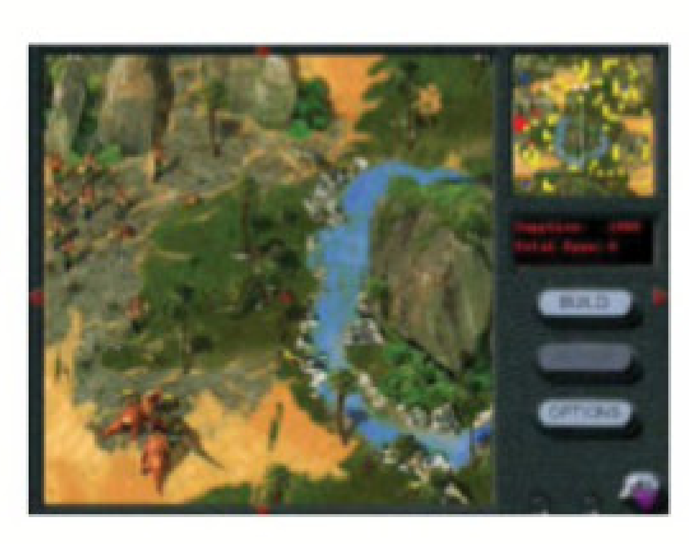


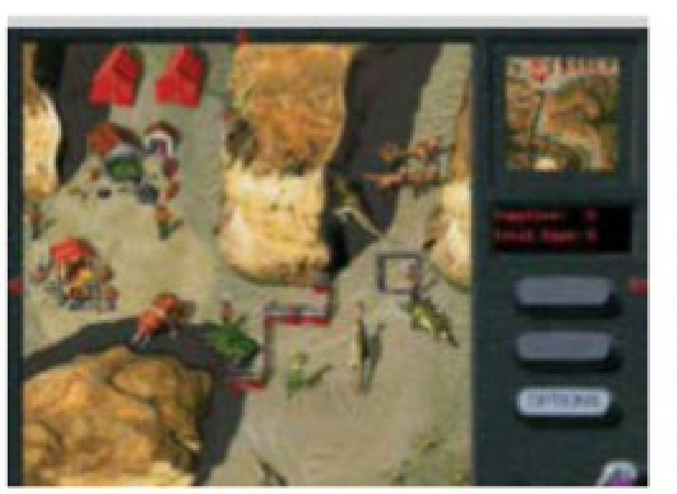
"AN EXCELLENT GAME THAT NOW COMMANDS A HIGH PRICE ONLINE"

JURASSIC PARK: CHAOS ISLAND 1997

PC

Chaos Island marks another first for the series, being the first real-time strategy game. Most of the actors from *The Lost World* reprise their roles, and are playable throughout the game. One particular nice touch is that their eyesight stat indicates how they're affected by fog of war. The 12 levels are loosely based around the events of the films and see you fending off attacks from increasingly stronger dinosaurs, and later, the film's hunters. An excellent game that now commands a high price online.

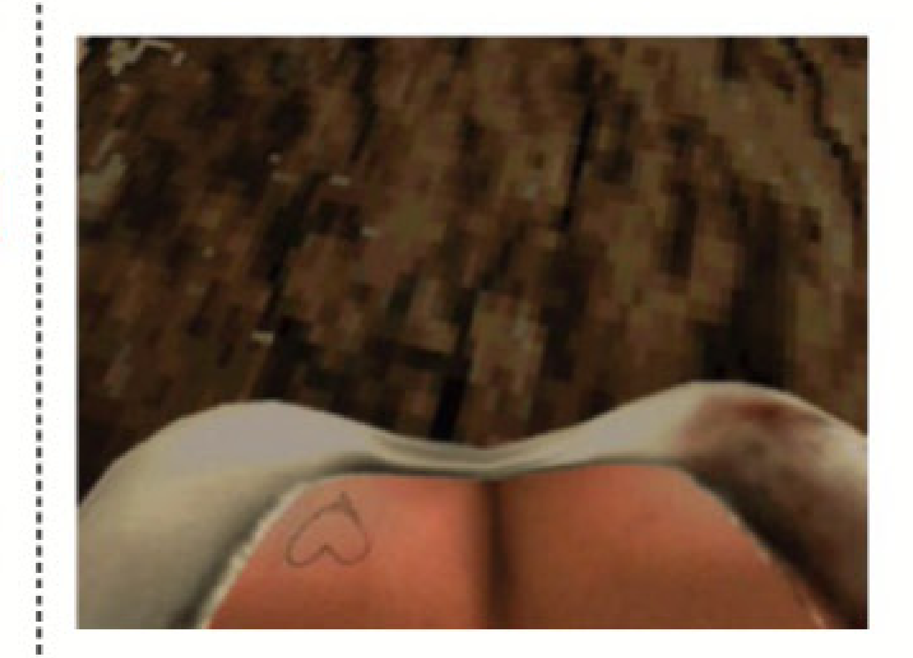




JURASSIC PARK: TRESPASSER 1998

PC

Trespasser was massively hyped on release and promised to be a ground-breaking adventure with 15-square kilometres of explorable terrain. The end result, however, was so power-hungry that many PC owners at the time struggled to run it properly. Those that could found an odd buggy mess of a game that had lots of interesting ideas, as well as a needlessly sexist health system (you check your vitality by looking at a heart-shaped tattoo on your female character's breasts). Like more recent games, it ignores a HUD in order to create a more immersive cinematic experience and promised an innovative control system who's only real successor has been *Surgeon Simulator 2013*. While it disappointed on release, *Trespasser* now boasts an impressive modding community that continues to shape the game to this day, making it one of the franchise's most enduring games.







WARPATH: JURASSIC PARK 1999

PLAYSTATION

You're probably thinking that a one-on-one fighting game featuring dinosaurs would be a terrible idea for a game. You'd be right. Clearly inspired by *Primal Rage*, *Warpath* tries hard by introducing a variety of interesting protagonists, but it's let down by unsatisfying combat and some weak animation. Still, at least we now know who will win in a fight between a T-Rex and an ankylosaurus...

JURASSIC PARK III: DINO DEFENDER 2001

PC



This PC game is squarely aimed at the younger end of the market. Created by Knowledge Adventure, it's a bright and breezy puzzle-adventure game that revolves around you moving crates and other items while activating switches, avoiding dinosaurs and wearing a robotic powersuit. It's not very challenging, but that's hardly surprising considering its audience.



JURASSIC PARK III: DANGER ZONE 2001

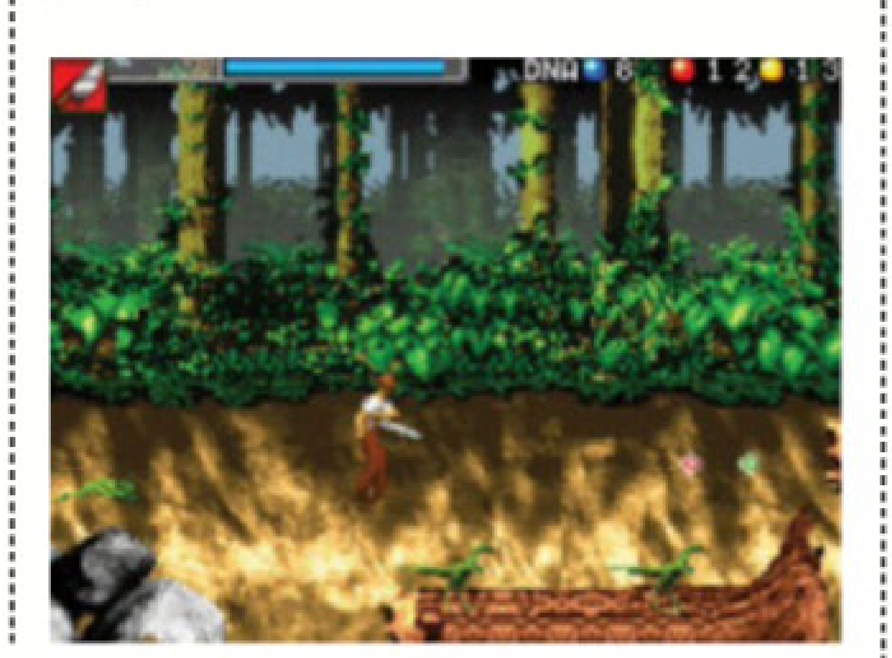
PC

Imagine *Monopoly* crossed with *Jurassic Park* and mini-games and you'll have a good representation of Knowledge Adventure's second game. One of two players take it in turn to navigate the game board, earning points and taking part in various mini-games that range from the fun to the banal. Like *Dino Defender* it's squarely aimed at the younger market, who won't be put off by the irritating announcer and the constant games of Raging Raptors (which is rubbish).

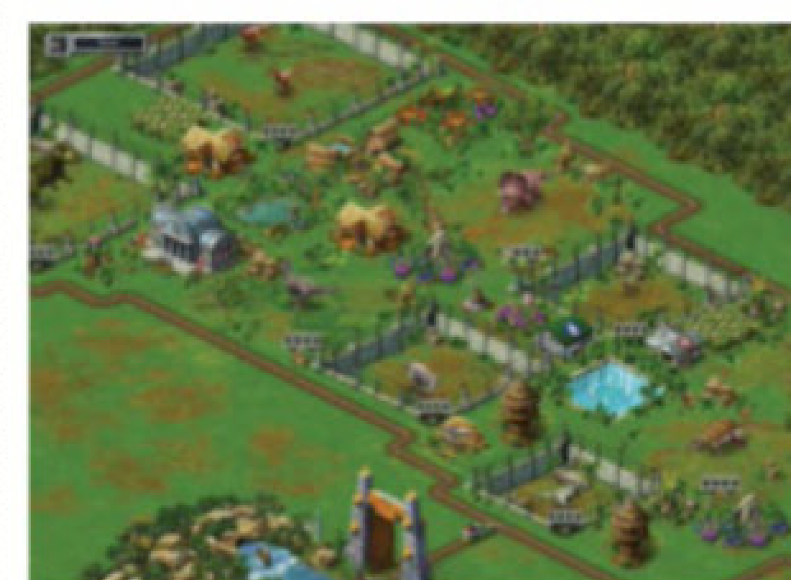
JURASSIC PARK III: ISLAND ATTACK 2001

GAME BOY ADVANCE

This isometric adventure is one of three Konami GBA games based on the third film. While the viewpoint allows for some rather huge dinos, the gameplay itself is rather lacking and dull. It's nice to see the developers focusing on running away from the dinos, but the introduction of the flare gun does makes for some exceedingly clunky combat that only gets worse as the adventure progresses. Leave it well alone.







JURASSIC PARK BUILDER 2012

FACEBOOK, IOS, ANDROID

This is quite possibly the most successful of the park builders that's available. Missions rarely require more than a few minutes of your time, meaning you can dip in and out whenever the need suits you. As with many Facebook games, it's designed so you can interact with your friends, but it never feels as intrusive as some titles. While it does use microtransactions we found that you don't need to spend large amounts of money to ensure your park flourishes. There's even a *Pokémon*-styled battle arena thrown in for good measure.



JURASSIC PARK: OPERATION GENESIS 2003

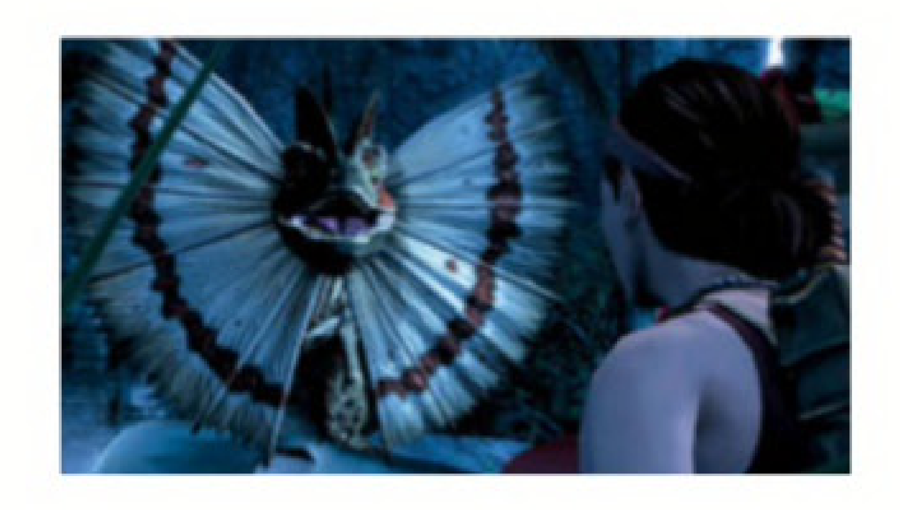
PS2, PC, XBOX

After a disappointing Game Boy Advance effort, Konami made big improvements to its next park builder. Tutorials are excellent, taking you through every aspect of creation. It's also nice graphically, particularly as your park grows in size. Missions ensure that there's always something to work to, while the option to allow your dinos to run amok is also a welcome addition. The lack of available dinos is disappointing and the interface is clunky, but it's still the best park builder for home systems.

JURASSIC PARK: THE GAME 2011

VARIOUS

Sadly, *Jurassic Park* is proof that not everything TellTale Games touches turns to gold. It has all the ropey engine issues found in many of the company's early releases, but compounds it by being one of the least interactive games in its back catalogue. It also doesn't help that the plot itself is terrible, with clichéd characters and uninspiring, unexciting set pieces. A real waste of the licence.

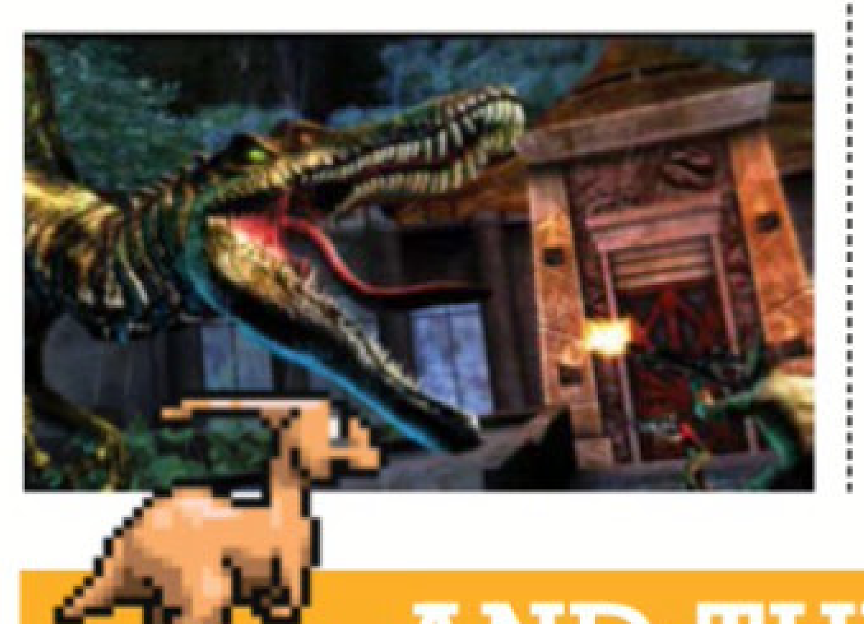




JURASSIC PARK ARCADE 2015

ARCADE

Raw Thrills is one of the arcade's biggest players and its latest game proves why. *Jurassic Park Arcade* is a stupendously good on-rails shooter that boasts stunning visuals, five meaty guns and a plethora of dinos to take down. Like the previous arcade *Jurassic Park* games, there's little substance to it, but the anarchic action and effects will have you constantly pumping coins into it.





LEGO JURASSIC WORLD 2015

VARIOUS

Due out now, the latest *Lego* game allows you to play through all four movies. As we went to press we were still waiting for review code, but you can expect over 100 characters to unlock, unique abilities for each hero and a whole host of studs and other goodies to collect.

AND THE REST...

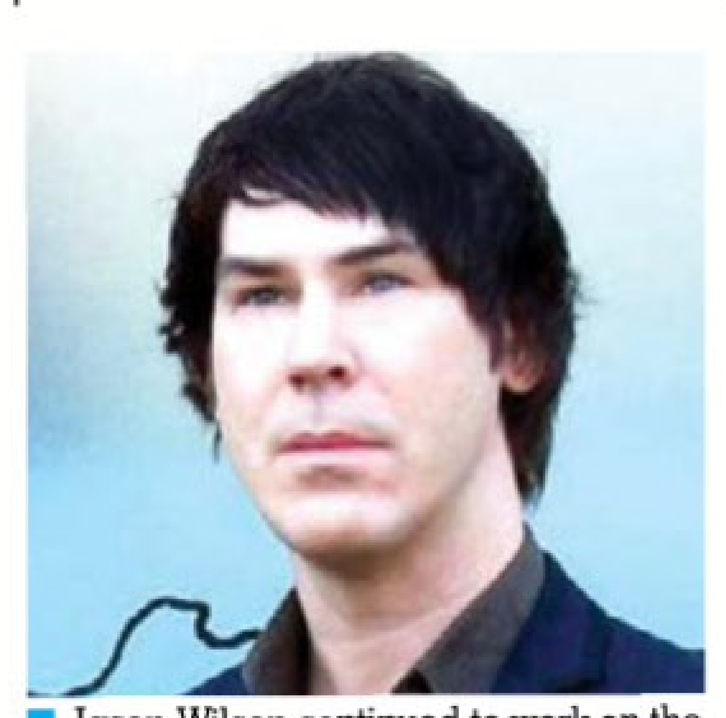
- JURASSIC PARK: RAMPAGE EDITION (1994) MEGA DRIVE
- THE LOST WORLD: JURASSIC PARK (1997) GAME BOY
- THE LOST WORLD: JURASSIC PARK (1997) GAME.COM
- JURASSIC PARK: DINOSAUR BATTLES (2001) PC
- JURASSIC PARK III: THE DNA FACTOR (2001) GBA
- JURASSIC PARK III (2001) ARCADE
- JURASSIC PARK: INSTITUTE TOUR (2001) GBA
- JURASSIC PARK III: SCAN COMMAND (2001) PC
- UNIVERSAL STUDIOS THEME PARK ADVENTURES (2001) GAMECUBE
- JURASSIC PARK III: PARK BUILDER (2001) GBA
- JURASSIC PARK (2010) MOBILE
- LEGO DIMENSIONS: JURASSIC WORLD PLAYSET (2015) VARIOUS
- JURASSIC WORLD: THE GAME (2015) IOS, ANDROID

BEHIND THE SCENES

MEDIEVIL

Conceived by Millennium Interactive in 1995, the MediEvil concept proved so popular with Sony that the Japanese giant bought the Cambridgeshire studio after claiming exclusive rights to the 3D hack-n-slash adventure. Two decades on, **games™** returns to the pioneering world of Gallowmere

Released: 1998
Format: PlayStation
Publisher: Sony Computer Entertainment
Developer: SCE Cambridge Studio
Key Staff: Chris Sorrell (Producer, Director), Jason Wilson (Game Designer, Writer), Martin Pond (Writer), Andrew Barnabas (Composer), Paul Arnold (Composer, Sound Effects)



Jason Wilson continued to work on the *MediEvil* series right up to *Resurrection.*

LISTENING TO *MEDIEVIL* creators Chris Sorrell and Jason Wilson chat about videogame development in the Nineties is like listening to two friends reminiscing about the good old days. Although now miles apart, they still share fond memories of the time they spent working together at Sony Cambridge Studio, which is well-reflected in some of the stories they have to tell.

"I remember one night we'd all had our curry, which we often did working late," explains Sorrell of the laid-back attitude within the team at the time. "We were just sitting around talking about ants for some reason, about how they were such fascinating creatures. The next day we decided we were going to have an ant cave level in [*MediEvil*]. We then came up with some crazy fiction about how you'd get shrunk down, and we made it. That was something you'd never be able to do in a big-budget game these days."

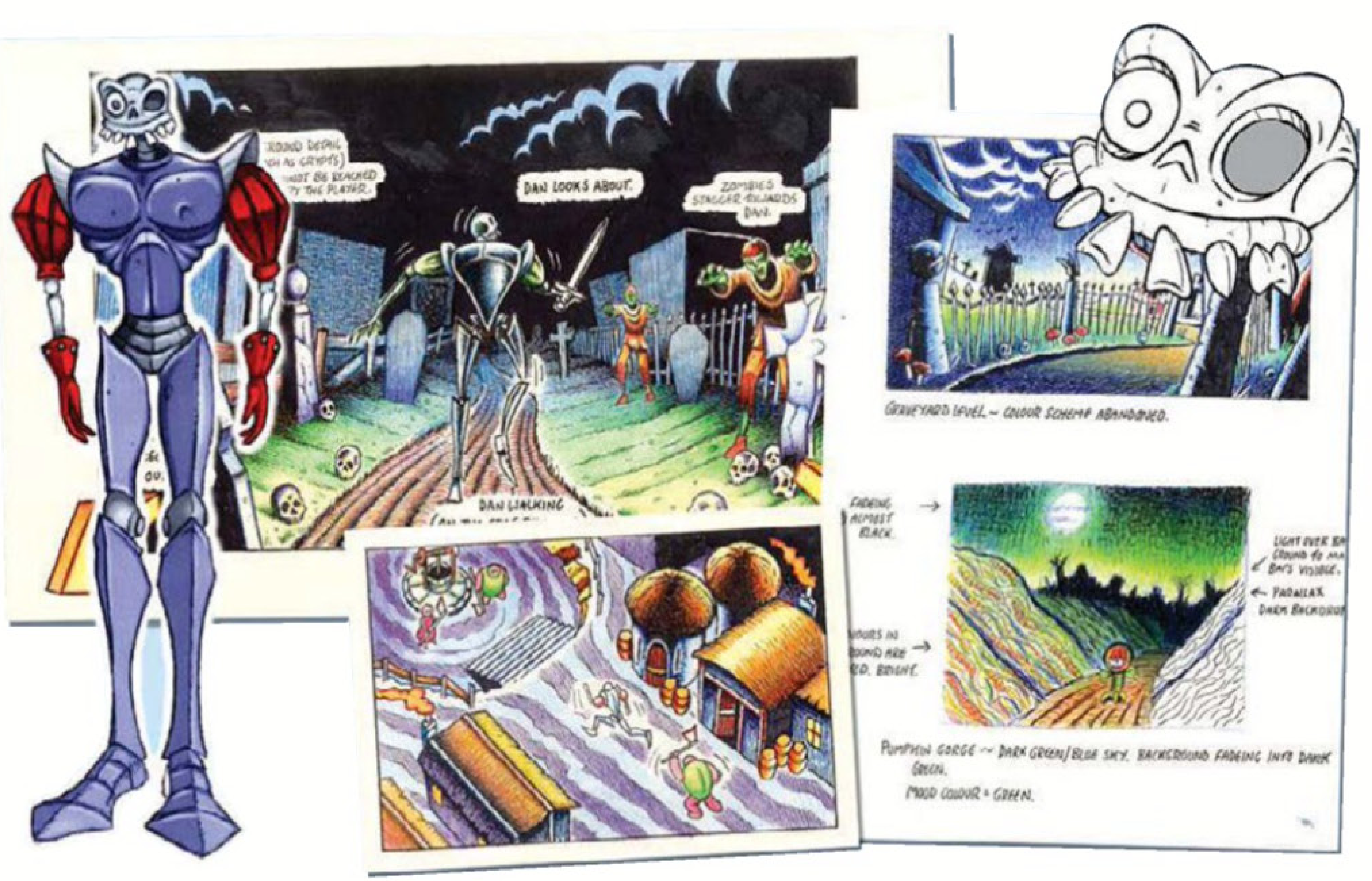
Wilson chuckles in the background – as if recalling the punchline before Sorrell finishes speaking. "Better still, we ended up populating the ant cave with Cockney fairies, because, well, you know."

Although unorthodox, understanding this working ethos isn't difficult. Listening to Sorrell and Wilson affectionately recall an era of wonder and possibility conjures imagery of a development team very much enjoying its work while on top of its game. Stories like this seem to be rather fitting. Sony Cambridge Studio, as it was then, now exists as Guerilla Cambridge – a branch of Guerilla Games, responsible for 2013's PS Vita shooter *Killzone: Mercenary*, as well as an as-yet unannounced PlayStation 4 project. Prior to this, SCE Cambridge was known as Millennium Interactive – where Sorrell and Wilson first joined forces.

"I joined Millennium after finishing *James Pond 3*," explains Sorrell. "I'd been working with them for a few years when the opportunity came up to work on something new. They asked me what I wanted to make and said I'd need to be working with someone on the visual side. Jason happened to be freeing up on whatever projects he was working on at the time. So we met up and started working on *MediEvil*."

Like Sorrell, Wilson had worked elsewhere – "another child of Eighties development," as he puts it – before a conversation with Millennium's development director, Ian Saunter, led him to taking a full-time post there. "In early 1995, Ian convinced me to help Chris start *MediEvil*," he says. "I'd met Chris before when I was a freelancer and we both loved horror movies and zombies and stuff like that – way before it was popular. It was a very good match." In those days, says Sorrell, developers who were already actively making games, were often offered the chance to champion their own projects further down the line. With the esteemed *James Pond* series and its spin-offs under his belt, Sorrell more than met this prerequisite and begun laying the foundations for *MediEvil* in late-1995.

While pulling together a demo to showcase to publishers, the team operated in the smallest possible configuration: a programmer for each platform, as




MEDIEVIL

Given that he's dead, missing an eye, and missing his entire jaw, can you blame Sir Dan for being so angry?

WHAT THEY SAID…

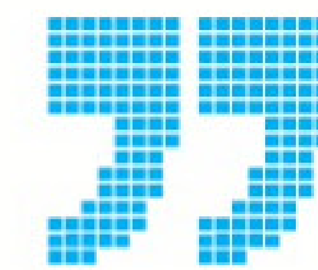
GAMESPOT PC PS4 Xbox One

MediEvil Review

All in all, it's a welcome surprise.

The real stars of *MediEvil* though are its variety, story, and difficulty level. As mentioned before, the diversity found from level to level adds a lot to the game, as does the wide and varied arsenal of weapons. The storyline is also strangely engrossing

Gamespot (October 23, 1998)



well as two or three artists with Wilson on the art and design side of things. Although having worked on several titles up to this point, Millennium was not in great health financially, and sought to secure a publisher for *MediEvil* as soon as possible.

Sega and Microsoft showed initial interest and demo versions for the Saturn and Windows 95 were rolled out in the first year of production. After delivering what Sorrell declares the team's "best pitch ever", though, Sony got behind the *MediEvil* IP with one caveat: that it be a PSOne exclusive.

The team obliged and within six months of working together, Sony bought over Millenium Interactive – SCE Cambridge Studio becoming Sony's only other UK studio besides its London office in July 1997. With Sony's input came more manpower, more structure, and crucially, more funding. Yet as a group of keen and ambitious twenty-something-year-olds, cash was never at the forefront of any of their minds. Instead, it was the complexities of designing games in 3D – a style that the industry was only just getting to grips with.

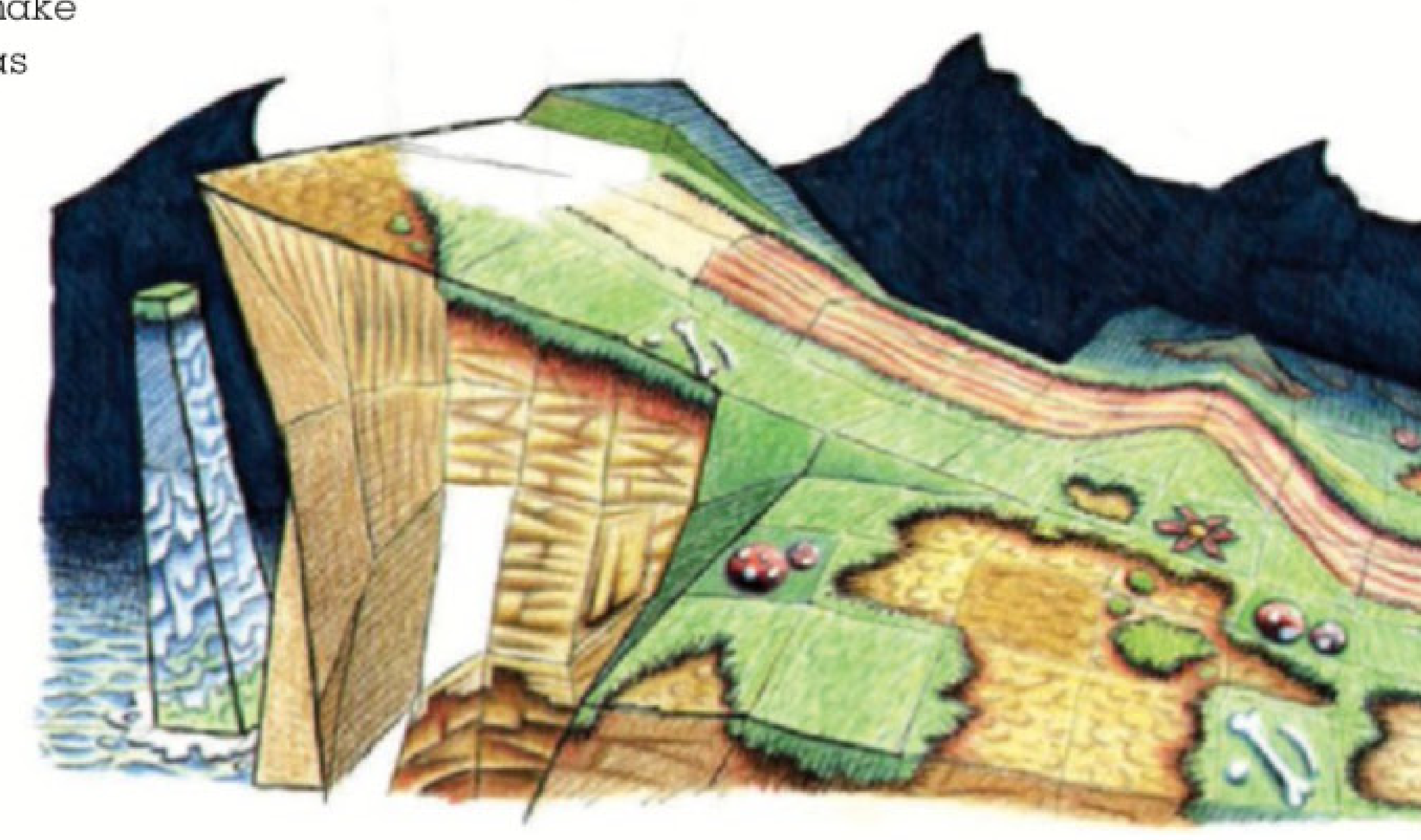
"I guess we were all young and naive in terms of budget stuff," says Sorrell. "We just wanted to make the games that we wanted to make, and I was always focused on making as big and as cool a game as I could. For me it was always that mix of *Ghouls 'N' Ghosts*, combined with a Tim Burton art style, and also doing all of this in 3D, which at the time was a relatively new thing. It was no foregone conclusion that each game would be 3D, so really it was the fusion of all of those things that was the starting point for *MediEvil*.

"It was a huge learning project for all of us as it was our first 3D project. It was very much us finding our feet and deciding on all the things we wanted to do that we didn't really know if we could. We were just trying things out and learning a lot from other games at the time, like *Mario 64*."

"Yeah, we didn't really have much going in," adds Wilson. "When we started out with *MediEvil*, it felt like really pioneering days of 3D technology and polygons and so on. I remember Chris and I in our little skeleton crew – no pun intended – working all manner of crazy hours and getting an actual 3D model on screen at, say, three o'clock in the morning, and it being this really momentous moment.

WE WERE JUST TRYING THINGS OUT AND LEARNING A LOT FROM OTHER GAMES AT THE TIME, LIKE MARIO 64

"You couldn't really get that nowadays because everything is possible, and everything has been done in a strange technical sort of way. Every little step we



made was like, 'Wow, that's so cool!' The good thing about Chris is that he allowed me to design some of the technology that we'd need to drive the art, so it was a really good relationship between the tech guys and Chris and myself. I look back at some of the documents of the things I wrote, or I drew – actual crayon drawings, little polygons of an environment, things like that – and it felt like pre-Photoshop, pre-Maya, and all these amazing packages we have nowadays. Instead, it was gluing things together and bits of string and literally bits of paper, and then trying, struggling desperately to get something that looks half-decent on screen. It was really small beginnings, but it was great!"

From the outset, it was clear Sorrell and Wilson were on the same wavelength. An affinity for all things horror, particularly that of Tim Burton's kooky gothic range, drove much of *MediEvil*'s aesthetics; and *The Crow*'s tale of undead avenger seeking revenge for murder loosely mirrored the game's narrative. At prototype stage, *MediEvil* went by the name of *Dead Man Dan*, a nod to the game's one-eyed protagonist Sir Daniel Fortesque, but it wasn't until much later that Dan's story was fully realised.





Prior to the Sony takeover, *MediEvil* posed a simple tale about a skeletal knight who'd hack and slash his way through hordes of zombie armies with little purpose or meaning, so when external scriptwriter Martin Pond suggested redemption as a core theme Sorrell and Wilson happily went with it. In turn, flesh was added to the bones of the concept and Wilson was able to craft more cohesive environments around what was now a more intuitive story. The rest of the character ensemble was born from necessity, designed to revolve around Sir Dan's central role.

Although Wilson admits games like *Mario 64* and *Zelda* influenced *MediEvil*'s makeup, he is proud of the unique worlds he and his team were able to create within the Kingdom of Gallowmere. Like much of Burton's work, *MediEvil*'s Gothic landscapes make it instantly recognisable – the distinguished settings often playing as big a part as Sir Dan himself.

"One thing I really liked about *MediEvil*, which I don't think was ever captured again in any other Sony Cambridge game, was the sense of the environments," he explains. "[They] were based heavily on German Expressionism, which is what Tim Burton based a lot of his early stuff on – that means lots of wonky, weird angles to the environments. We'd build villages and towns on domes, so that all the buildings were all coming off the central axes. The camera would be orchestrated to move over this dome, creating rolling environments, and adding some really strange otherworldly cameras and perspectives to the world. We could orchestrate enemy attacks and what we wanted to show at various points, while giving the player a degree of control over the camera. We were very ambitious when I think back to it."

This ambition, coupled with a unique sense of humour, is what drove Sony Cambridge Studio forward with *MediEvil* in its formative years. Videogames to this day have largely struggled to convey humour with any level of finesse, yet *MediEvil* captured charming slapstick comedy like none other before it. Better still, each joke was a natural reflection of how the team worked behind the scenes, as opposed to a vetted process at the commanding hand of a publisher. Sorrell labels the comedy as a "happy accident" and

LIGHTS, ACTION, CAMERAS!

Creator Chris Sorrell explains the importance of finding the right camera angle

ON GETTING IT WRONG:

■ "I never thought about how difficult the idea of following a character around was until we actually came to do it. Initially we went for a spline camera – where the view is very much in the artist's control. I was becoming increasingly irritated by how this style gave you no freedom to feel like you were exploring the world. I was fighting to get rid of it as soon as we had it."

ON GETTING IT RIGHT:

■ "That's one of the cool things you get in 3D that you just don't have in 2D: a sense of exploring. What's behind that, or in that box, or on top of that cliff? That, for me, was part of the experience that I wanted to make in the game. We changed it to a more free-form camera and it just worked."



RATS THAT GO SPLAT

The twisted humour of the MediEvil team

WHEN MEDIEVIL RELEASED to the masses in 1998, the majority of reviews at the time remarked on the game's unique sense of humour. Creator Chris Sorrell admits he injected comedy only where it felt appropriate, and that it wasn't necessarily a conscious thing.

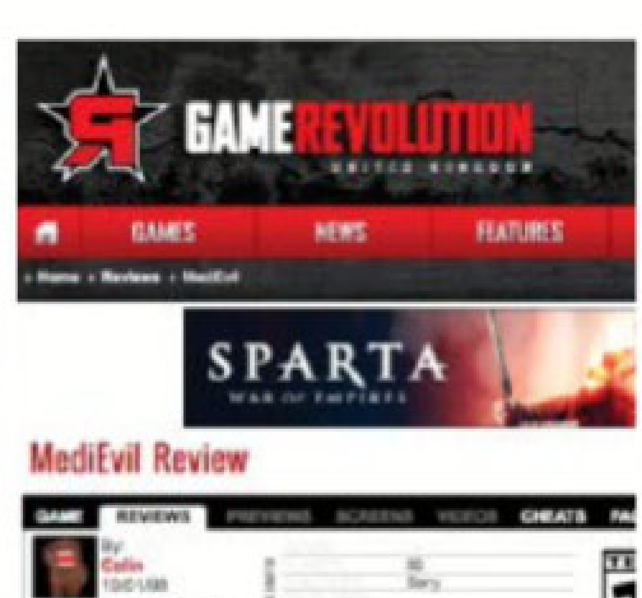
"We had a programmer working with us who was the lead on the project," tells Sorrell. "He came from a business background… I guess he always struggled a bit to match the way that the rest of us were making the game and our perspective on things with his slightly stuffy business background.

"He was a big fan of rats. He loved his pet rat, he was always going on about them. This is a bit of sad story in a way, but towards the end of the project we'd drifted apart in terms of how much he enjoyed working on a project that wasn't quite being made the way he was used to making them. He ended up leaving us about two months before the end. We [made] it so that you could squash the rats. I guess that comes from a slight feeling of betrayal. We did have a lot of good times with him, though!"



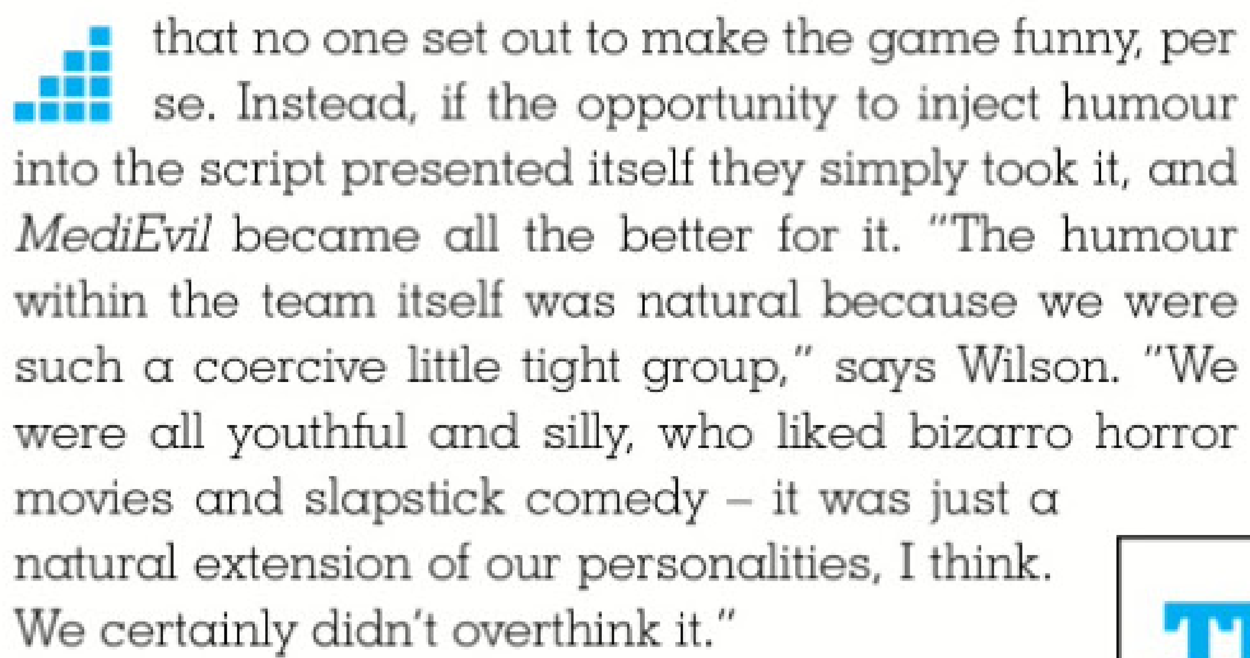


WHAT THEY SAID…



As you might have guessed, the designers obviously had a distinct sense of humour that permeates the game, and, at times, has you laughing out loud. In the end, what we have here is one of the cleverest platform games ever made

GameRevolution (October 1, 1998)



that no one set out to make the game funny, per se. Instead, if the opportunity to inject humour into the script presented itself they simply took it, and *MediEvil* became all the better for it. "The humour within the team itself was natural because we were such a coercive little tight group," says Wilson. "We were all youthful and silly, who liked bizarro horror movies and slapstick comedy – it was just a natural extension of our personalities, I think. We certainly didn't overthink it."

The determined but laid-back attitude of the *MediEvil* masterminds is perhaps best outlined by the Sony takeover itself. In the close-knit, personable days of Millennium there was no such concept as a staff conference, so the formal, business-like approach of Sony became quite intimidating for Sorrell and Wilson. Although they both considered themselves professionals, the boardroom ethos of the Sony execs they were dealing with had them occasionally second-guessing themselves.

Although Sony's acquisition of Millennium had essentially come from the Japanese tech giant's interest in *MediEvil*, the takeover also brought about a distinct level of expectation on the MediEvil team. If Sony was devoting quite so much interest and resources to this game, it naturally expected a return on its investment.

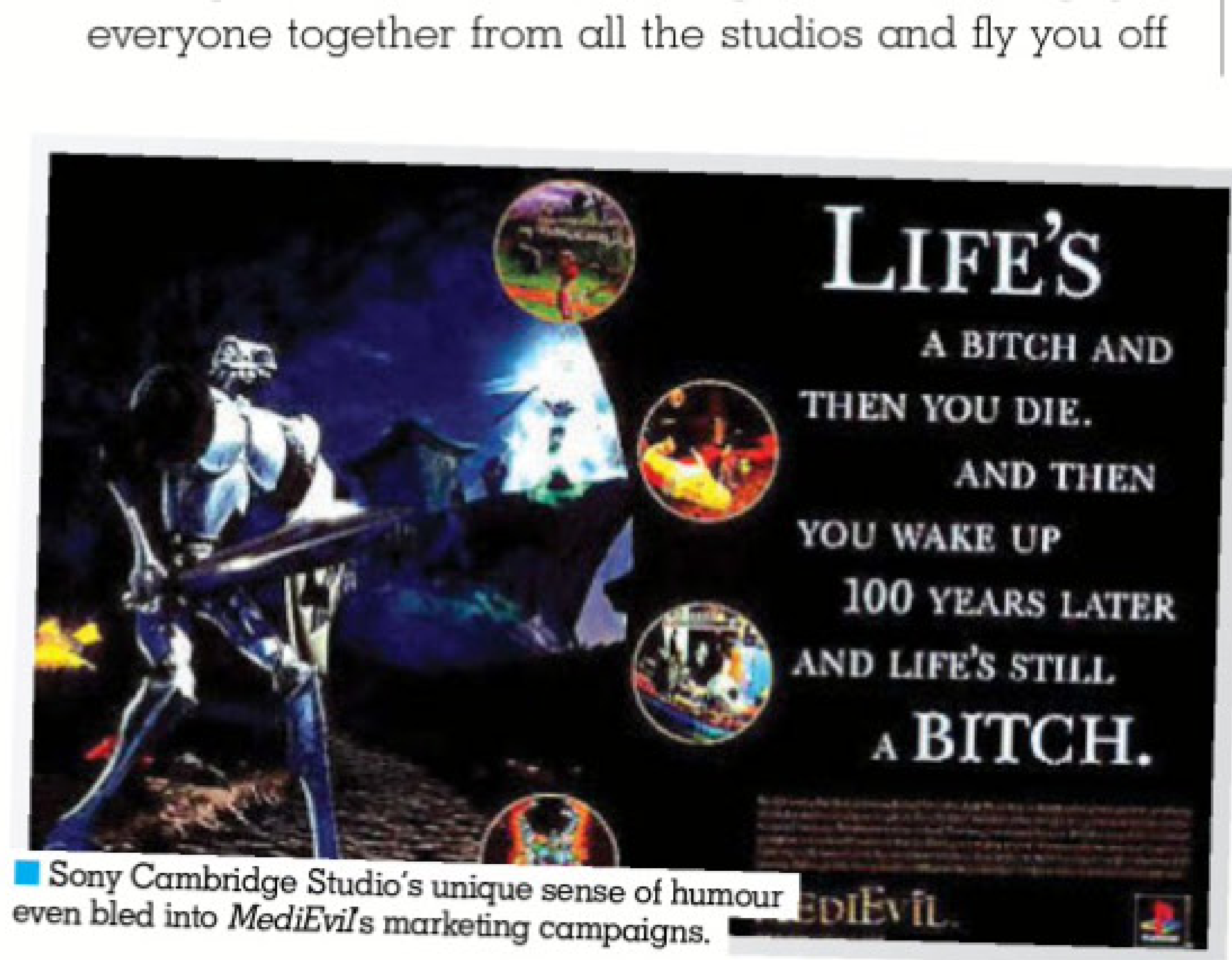
"It sort of came home to me when we first had a big staff conference, which was a totally alien concept," recalls Sorrell. "Sony would actually get everyone together from all the studios and fly you off somewhere – I think we went to Tenerife for the first one – and they'd expect you to stand up and talk in front of everybody about what you were doing and things. That was like, 'woah, we're not in Kansas anymore!' It was a strange thing.

"I also got to go to a few meetings early on where all the Sony producers got together and it all felt suddenly like we were part of a big project by that stage and the stakes were so much higher. I'd never worked as part of a big studio before, so it was a bit of a wake up to realise there were all these people who were actually really experienced in all these positions and really knew what they were talking about – it made me question 'do I know what I'm talking about? Do I know what I'm doing? Should I be here?' But yeah, we got through it."

THE END RESULT WAS SOMETHING THAT WE WERE PROUD OF AND WE HAD A LOT OF FUN

At the time, Sony was relatively unproven on the world stage as far as videogames were concerned, and Wilson points out that it was very much learning at the same time then Sony Cambridge was. Granted, expectations were high, but the Cambridge team suddenly had so many state-of-the-art facilities at its fingertips. As the new kids on the block, both Wilson and Sorrell commend the proportionately stand-offish approach Sony took with them at the time.

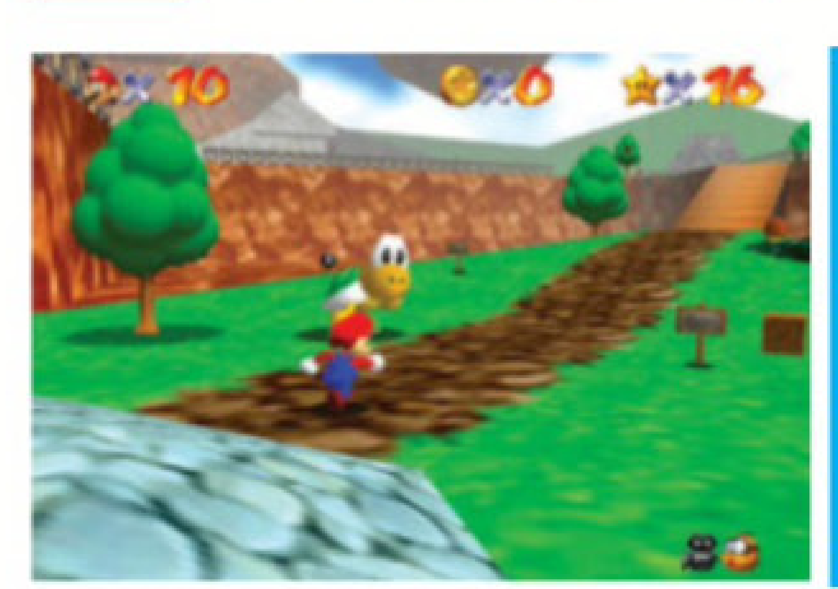
"*MediEvil* definitely benefitted from not being a designed product," continues Sorrell. "It wasn't designed to start a franchise or any of the pretension that is there with any big modern development nowadays. I actually caught the end of someone doing a playthrough of [*MediEvil*] recently at the end part where Zarok has been defeated and he's doing his final spell curse. Suddenly a rock falls from the ceiling. It's still ridiculous and stupid, but I don't think anyone would do that kind of thing now – they'd be thinking of keeping Zarok around for the sequel."



Sony Cambridge Studio's unique sense of humour even bled into *MediEvil*'s marketing campaigns.

> GAMING EVOLUTION

Mario 64 > MediEvil > MediEvil 2

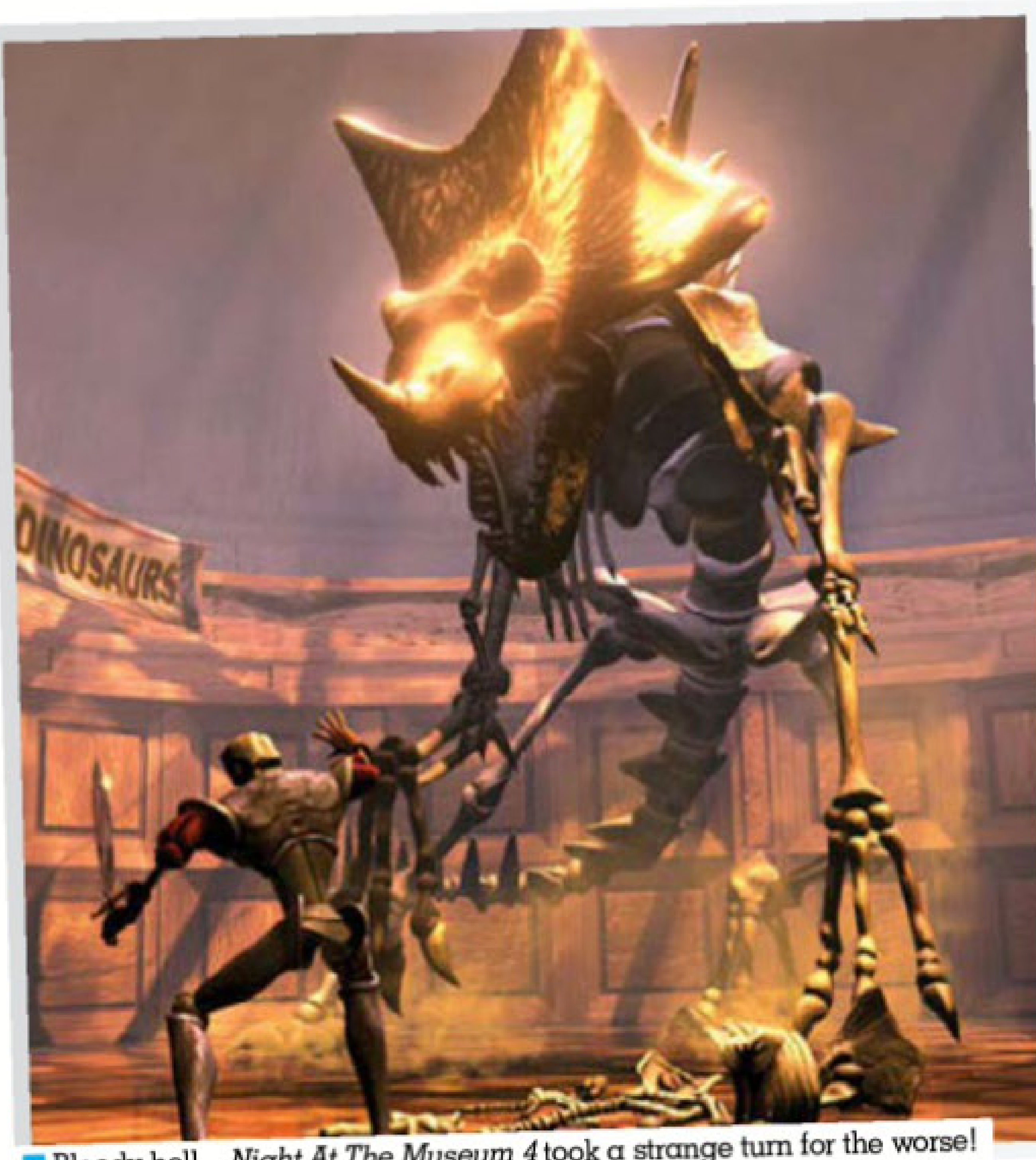


In the mid-90s, 3D games were still finding their feet but *Mario 64* showed just how the transition from 2D should be done.



Seeing what worked in other games, *MediEvil* introduced us to Gallowmere – a brilliant Tim Burton-inspired nightmarescape.





Bloody hell – *Night At The Museum 4* took a strange turn for the worse!

In 2000, *MediEvil* did receive a sequel, but when the original released in 1998, Sorrell was admittedly "*MediEvil*'d out". He went on to work on PlayStation 2's *Primal*, although the intervening period made him regret leaving Gallowmere behind quite so soon. Wilson continued with number two and recalls seeing the same underlying ideas from different perspectives as strange but interesting in equal measure.

In 2005 an entirely new team took on a PSP remake named *Resurrection*, and while Sorrell and Wilson offered advice and consultation, it was done so at arm's length and without any sense of ownership – something that didn't sit well with Sorrell. Although able to accept some of the changes the new team had made, he felt that he and his team's *MediEvil* vision was what made the series – a fact accentuated by the glowing reviews the original received seven years prior.

Which is why, ten years on, speaking of *MediEvil*'s legacy with Sorrell seems a touch bittersweet. He appears glad it was left behind before it had the chance to evolve into something too unfamiliar, yet he'd also love to revive the series in some way or form given how much fun he had while developing it – a process that began two decades ago. The IP is now very much under Sony's control though, so the chances of this ever happening are most unlikely.

In the meantime, Sorrell and Wilson have long since left *MediEvil* behind. Sorrell lives in Canada and is working on his own indie title, while Wilson has returned to his first love: illustrating comic books. Yet *MediEvil* marked some of the most exciting years of their careers to date.

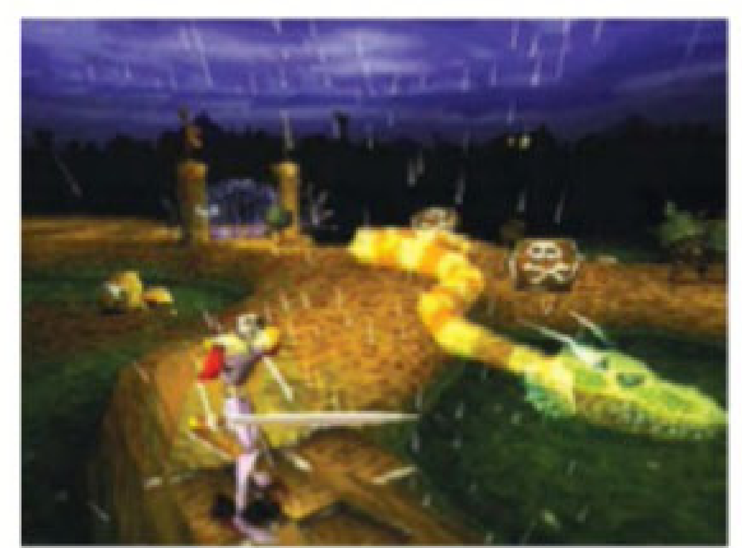
"I think you feel nostalgia for the development ethos more than the actual game itself, even though I really like the game," says Wilson. "It's just that time of possibility and naivety. I think sometimes the more companies can inflict process and knowledge on you, the less you know; the more you know the less you know, in a way. You become more fearful of creativity and question yourself. When I look at *MediEvil*, I see naivety and joy and the enthusiasm of making games.

"Also, it's really strange – I remember when I used to love sci-fi movies and TV shows and you think about all the little things in the stories and the trivial information you dwell upon. There are forums about *MediEvil* on the internet where the users debate every detail of the game. Half the things we just made up on the spot! It just proves to me that lots of things are just made up in TV and movies, but other people end up taking them really seriously."

Both Sorrell and Wilson speak so fondly of their time at Sony Cambridge Studio that working on *MediEvil* truly seems like the highlight of their games development careers. "Yeah, I'd say it was," agrees Sorrell. "That sort of feeling of team that we had then, we all got on really well, we'd all had highs and lows together working long hours. Overall, though, the end result was something that we were all proud of and we had a lot of fun making it. You can't get much better than that."



Sir Daniel Fortesque is a cocky protagonist for a dead guy with no jaw and one functioning eye.







Tim Burton's influence can be seen unashamedly throughout *MediEvil*'s crooked and wonky architecture.

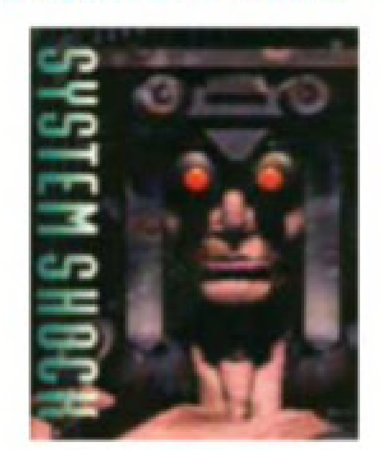


INTERVIEW

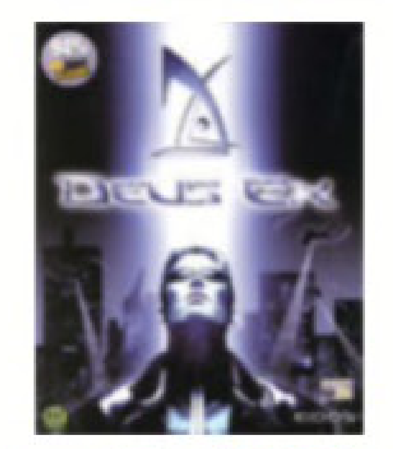
WARREN SPECTOR

The innovation that Deus Ex brought with it 15 years ago permeates through the industry to this day, a fact that director/producer Warren Spector can hardly believe…

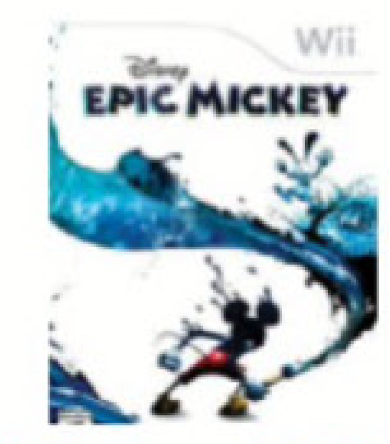
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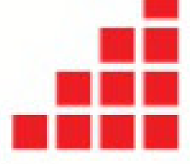
System Shock (1994)
Producer



Deus Ex (2000)
Executive Producer



Epic Mickey (2010)
Creative Director



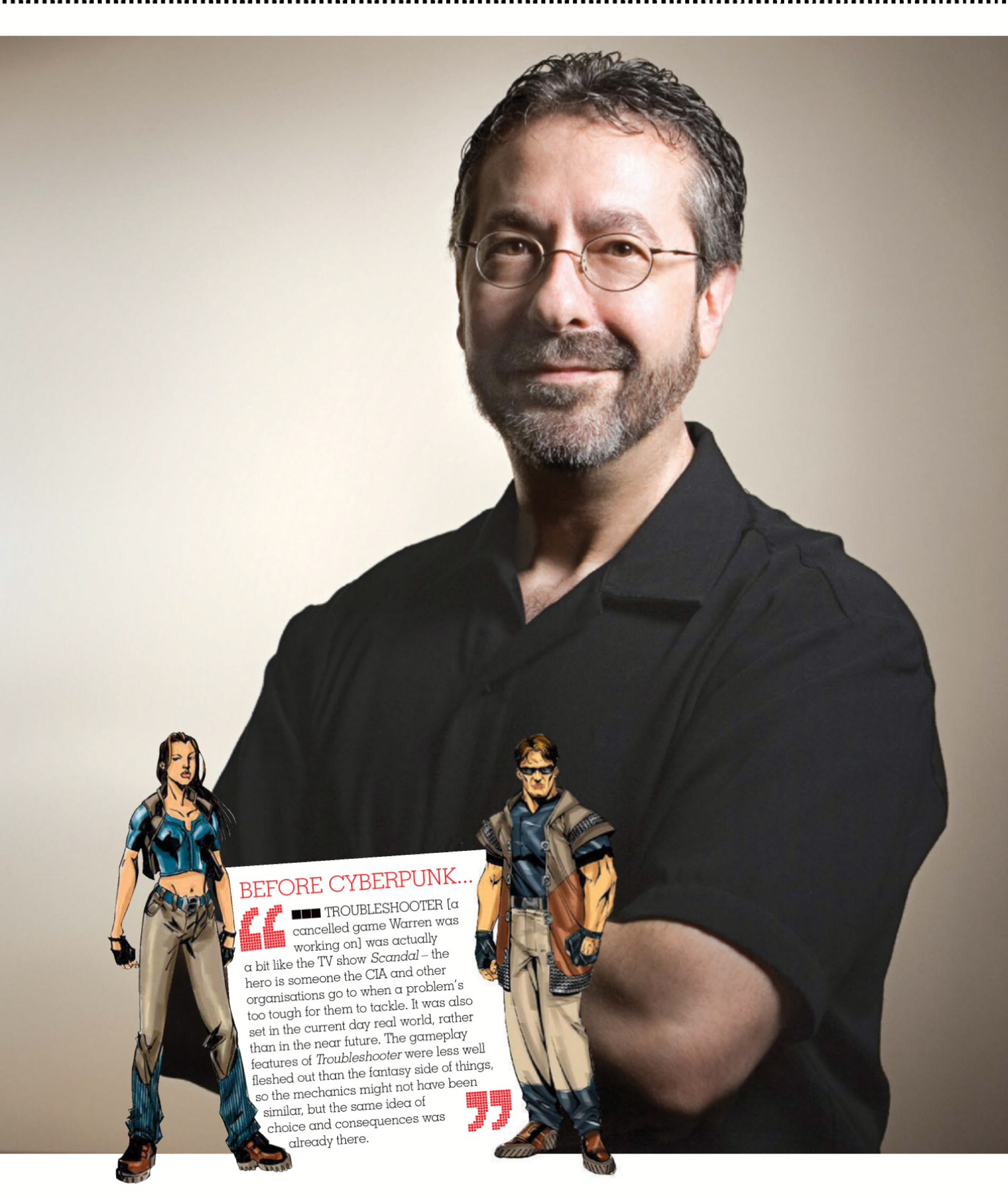
You had wanted to create something very different with *Deus Ex*, what drove this ambition?
The reason I wanted to make *Troubleshooter* and, later, *Deus Ex*, was because I was sick to death of space marines and knights in armour, super soldiers, orcs, elves. I just felt stifled by sci-fi and fantasy, which dominated roleplaying and first-person shooters at the time. I felt like I'd scream if I had to make another game like that. So I set out to make the "real-world roleplaying game".

What were some of the core design decisions you decided on for *Deus Ex*?
There were three core fictional tenets that survived from day one. 1) What happens when you have a guy who believes in good and evil and throw him into a world that's all shades of gray? 2) What would the world be like if every conspiracy people believe to be true is in fact true? 3) And what does it mean to be human (and what does that say about how the world should relate to machines)? I think all of those are pretty well expressed. In addition, there was one core gameplay tenet that never changed: what if players could solve problems however they wanted to and see the consequences? Could we share authorship with players in the telling a story where no two players have the same experience? I think we did a pretty good job of that, too.

The setting was one of the stand-out features; what was that design process like?
The initial impetus was mine (the world of conspiracies) but the world itself was a team effort.

> **WE WERE TOTALLY INTO THE PRE-MILLENNIAL MADNESS OF CONSPIRACY THEORIES. YOU WOULDN'T BELIEVE SOME OF THE THINGS PEOPLE BELIEVE!**

I remember having long discussions with designers like Steve Powers and Kraig Count early on. And later, guys like Harvey Smith and Bob White came along and contributed a bunch. And, of course, Sheldon Pacotti, our lead writer contributed a *ton* to the setting. Obviously, we were influenced by the movie *Blade Runner*. But we were also totally into the pre-millennial madness of conspiracy theories. You wouldn't believe some of the things



BEFORE CYBERPUNK...

“TROUBLESHOOTER [a cancelled game Warren was working on] was actually a bit like the TV show *Scandal* – the hero is someone the CIA and other organisations go to when a problem's too tough for them to tackle. It was also set in the current day real world, rather than in the near future. The gameplay features of *Troubleshooter* were less well fleshed out than the fantasy side of things, so the mechanics might not have been similar, but the same idea of choice and consequences was already there.”


The conspiratorial tone was set immediately with this memorable conversation, though the truth of the situation would unravel over the course of the game.

people believe! And, finally, there was a real commitment to making the game as realistic as possible. I got blueprints for the Statue of Liberty… took a bunch of reference photos of the catacombs in Paris. Everything was as realistic as possible. I even got maps of the layout of Area 51!

Were there many changes to the setting and tone throughout development?
Well, we were originally going to set a mission in the White House. And there were some missions set in the space between the Mexican border and Austin, TX. And we knew what was happening in China and Africa and even the asteroid belt. None of that made it into the game. The tone of the game was the work of everyone on the team kind of rallying behind the *Blade Runner* look and feel. Total cliché now but I like to think we were there before it became cliché! The team really committed to that and nailed it, I think.

You wanted to make a game that played differently to anything else; what was the process of designing something so purposefully innovative?
I mean, it's not like we were the first RPG, or the first FPS, or the first stealth game. We just wanted to be the first game to combine all three genres into one package. And we were committed to the idea of choice and consequence, of letting players tell their own minute-to-minute story in the context of a narrative arc created by us, the developers. Very few developers were doing that back then. Put that together and you have something we all recognised would be new and fresh and, yes, innovative.

So how did the combination of RPG and FPS mechanics come about?
I think that combination was a direct result of working at Origin and Looking Glass. I mean, *Underworld* kind of did something similar. And *System Shock*. And *Thief*. We just took the RPG aspects further. At some level, you could say that's all we did. Man, when you put it that way, it doesn't sound so innovative, does it. I should shut up now!

With complete freedom of player control so novel at the time, what kind of new challenges did you encounter implementing the feature?
Freedom over how you tackle a situation was *the* core part of the game's design. At some level, nothing else mattered, at least not to me. *Deus Ex* may be the clearest example, but every game I've worked on has been an attempt to empower players to direct their own experience. Did player choice impact the way environments and missions were designed? Oh, man, yes. I used to tell interviewees that what we did at Ion Storm was harder than anything they'd ever done before – it's tough to put your creativity on the back burner so players can express *their* creativity. Most potential hires thought I was nuts. I got used to seeing that knowing, indulgent nod that said, "Sure, what you do is harder… whatever". The ones who got hired often came back to me later and said "You were right!" To get some real insight into this, talk to some of the designers on the team and they'll tell you just how hard it was!

Were these choices difficult to implement?
A lot of people think *Deus Ex* is a game about choices. It is, sort of, but the important bit isn't the choices, it's the consequences of those choices. The game had to notice what you were doing and respond appropriately. If you're not showing the consequences, choices are irrelevant. If the choices don't matter, you might as well not go to the trouble of offering them. That's just a waste of time and money. There are dozens of challenges associated with choice and consequence gameplay, not least of which is containing what could very easily turn into a traditional branching narrative. We did *not* want to do that, so we structured the game in a way that constrained the problem. Basically, *Deus Ex* is a completely linear

AUGMENTED VISION

"I HAD A very clear idea of what I wanted the team to accomplish and I had a team that totally bought into the vision, that wanted desperately to do what we were trying to do. There was no one who wanted to just make a shooter or wanted the game to be something other than what it was always destined to be. There were countless areas where there wasn't consensus on the team about details, but the overall vision was something we all agreed on."


Augmentation canisters not only gave players further permanent choices about how they want to play; they were rare enough to instil joy upon finding one.

storyline but the story is told by traversing a series of self-contained sandboxes. Within a given story element, or sandbox, all we needed to know was where the player started and where the player ended – which we determined. How they got where we needed them to go was up to them.



The game's story was heavily praised at the time. How was it guided during development?
Several of us worked on the original story. I sort of took over after a while and took all the elements we'd come up with and put them together into a completely unimplementable kitchen sink of ideas. Two things happened to fix that: first, Harvey Smith, the lead designer, and Steve Powers, one of my favourite designers on the planet, came to me and said, "Warren, we can't tell this story." They took me out to lunch and laid out a smaller, more constrained, more do-able version, which is pretty much what we built.

The second thing that happened was I found Sheldon Pacotti, who became our lead writer – and for much of the game's development, our only writer. Much of the game's thematic depth and what people think of as the story's "intelligence" came right out of his imagination. We all contributed, but the game would have been radically different without Sheldon's contributions. A real unsung hero. The weird thing was he had carpal tunnel syndrome so we got Dragon Naturally Speaking [voice recognition software] and he *spoke* all the dialogue and books and such in the game. It was entertaining walking by his office sometimes!

And how about the music? How did the team settle on what would fit the game's style?
I don't know what more I can say beyond the fact that Alexander Brandon did a great job on the music and sound. He created the distinctive *Deus Ex* 'sound'. One of the things I think *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* did right was capturing that sound. I was pretty psyched about that. One other thing, audio-wise: not a lot of people remember that there were three or four tunes written by Reeves Gabrels – a guitar god who used to play with David Bowie. One of the big thrills for me on *Deus Ex* was getting to hang out with him at his New York studio. I even got a guitar from him – a bubblegum pink '57 Les Paul Junior! Of course, Alex had to take those tunes and get them working with the *Deus Ex* audio system, so his fingerprints are all over Reeves' stuff, too.

IF THE CHOICES DON'T MATTER, YOU MIGHT AS WELL NOT OFFER THEM. THAT'S A WASTE OF TIME

What sorts of problems did you encounter during development that you didn't anticipate?
It might be better to ask what problems we *didn't* encounter during development! I made mistakes in team structure, for sure. There were running issues with the folks paying the bills about why we weren't "just making a shooter". There were game systems and story elements I came up with that the team and testers had to tell me were unimplementable or just plain bad. I wanted everything in the game and the team had to talk me down from some pretty crazy stuff a few times. And despite that, the game was so ambitious and we were doing so many things no one had ever done before, it was just plain nuts. How did we handle things? I changed the team structure; the team beat me into submission; we worked really hard… it was game development, you know?

Looking back, is there anything that you would have done differently?
You know, I don't really think I'd change anything (as long as there are the same technical limitations in the equation!). The game was of its time, technically, and in terms of its UI and its graphics. And, though every detail changed – thanks to a team that was way smarter than I was – the game played pretty much exactly the way I imagined and hoped it would when I first started thinking about it in 1994, long before we shipped.

Did you get a sense that *Deus Ex* was destined to be the success it was, prior to its release?
Yes and no. I mean, the positive response we got – from testers, folks at trade shows, journalists – gave us some hope. But I remember sitting at my desk when we gold mastered, putting my head in my hands on my desk thinking to myself, "If people compare our combat to *Half-Life*, we're dead; if people compare our stealth to *Thief*, we're dead; if people compare our role-playing elements to what BioWare does, we're dead. But if people get that they can do *anything* they want, we're going to rule the world." Things worked out okay.



Spector has had a massive impact on the industry having worked on games as varied as Wing Commander and Epic Mickey.

GAME CHANGERS

THE LEGEND OF ZELDA

Released: 21 February 1986 **Publisher:** Nintendo **Developer:** In-house (Nintendo R&D4) **System:** Famicom Disk System / NES



It's actually possible to reach the final boss of the game without ever picking up Link's iconic sword not that we would necessarily recommend it as a way to go about things.

Everyone knows *Zelda* – aside from being Nintendo's seminal RPG franchise, the series has become a symbol of gaming itself. The heroic Link is paraded around as much as Mario or Sonic. But where did it all begin and what did the first game do so right that made it stick in everyone's mind so fervently?

WITHOUT *THE LEGEND OF ZELDA*, the RPG as we know and love it today wouldn't exist. But that isn't to say that it was a true RPG in and of itself – think about the core mechanics: there are no experience points, no interchangeable characters, no 'jobs'. The original *Zelda* was, instead, a foundation, a basis for home console games in an age where the arcade ruled. *The Legend Of Zelda* was developed concurrently with *Super Mario Bros.*, both by visionary and auteur Shigeru Miyamoto, and as such he wanted the two titles to head in *very* different directions.

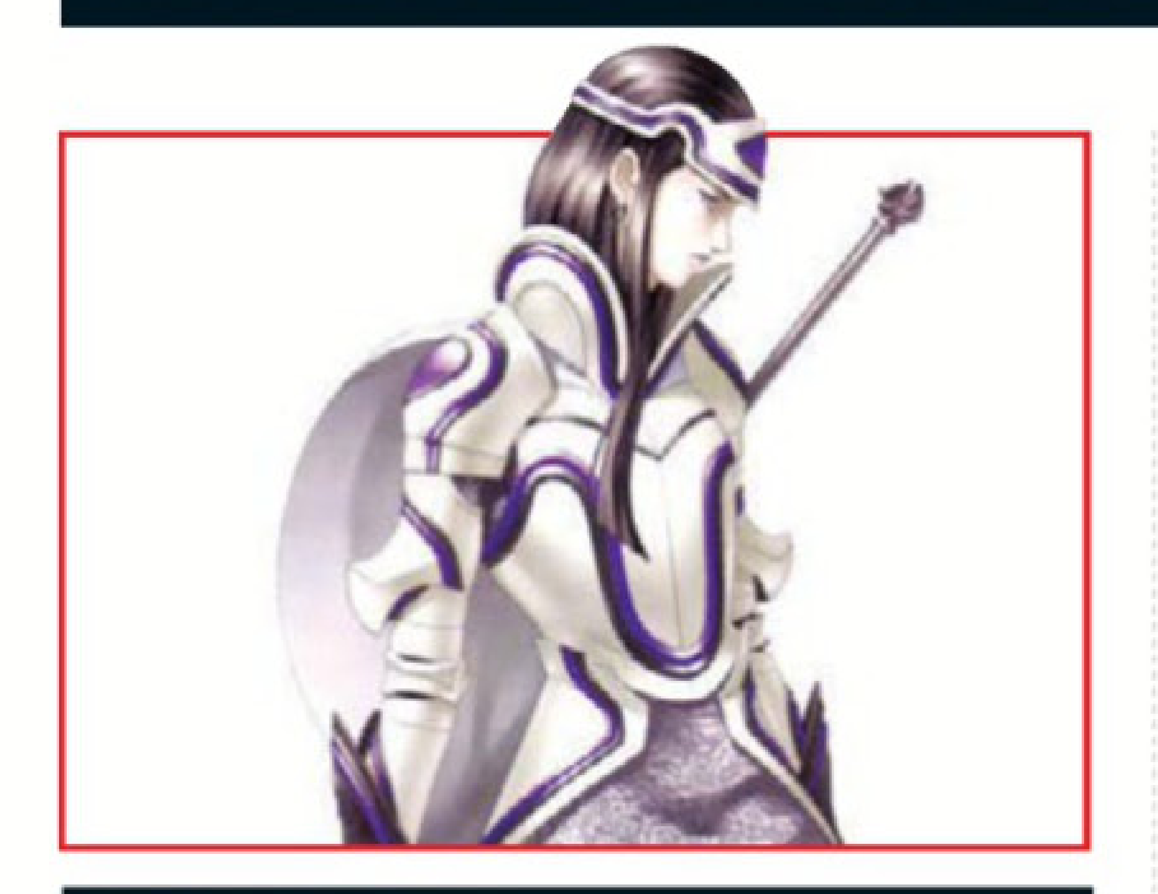
Super Mario Bros. was designed to be linear, to offer players the challenge of one obstacle at a time to overcome – a trial and error game that presented a single finite challenge at a time: a score attacker's paradise. *Zelda* was built to occupy the opposite space to that; it wasn't about high scores and action in sequence, it was constructed to make the player *think* about where to go next – combining textual cues with map design and environmental storytelling to help the player come to their own conclusion.

Miyamoto knew there would be no point in just sending players down into labyrinthine dungeons to find the right path amid a jumble of dead ends – he knew that, by opting for the top-down view, he had to give the players something else, something more aesthetically pleasing to carry them through this new land of Hyrule. Rumour has it that Miyamoto originally came up with the idea for *The Legend Of Zelda* as he was daydreaming, opening random desks at his drawer and imagining a unique garden within each of them – that fantasy began to build the rich Hyrulean environment, mixed with memories of his native Sonobe – fields, woods, natural caves, lakes and hills.

In building a fantasy home away from home, Miyamoto gave his game its most notable quality – creating a world that provoked wanderlust; the need

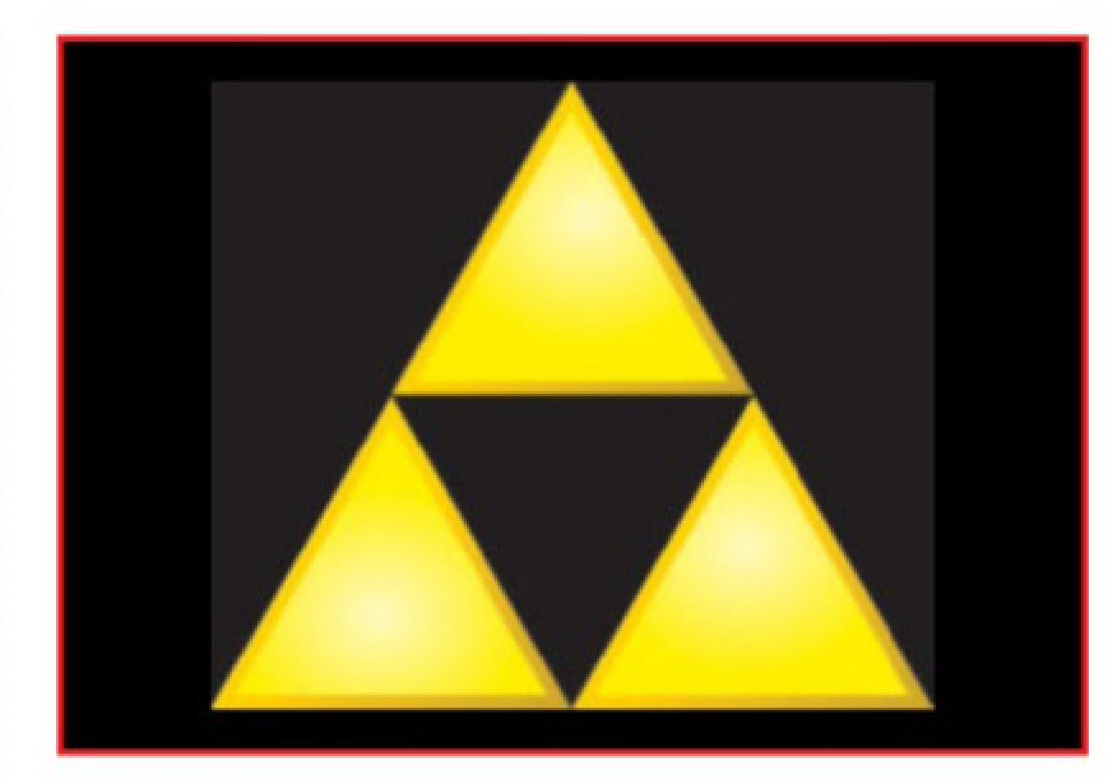
THE ANATOMY OF THE LEGEND OF ZELDA

THE LEGEND OF ZELDA SHAPED THE GAMING INDUSTRY AS WE KNOW IT – BUT WHAT WERE THE CORE COMPONENTS OF THE GAME ITSELF?



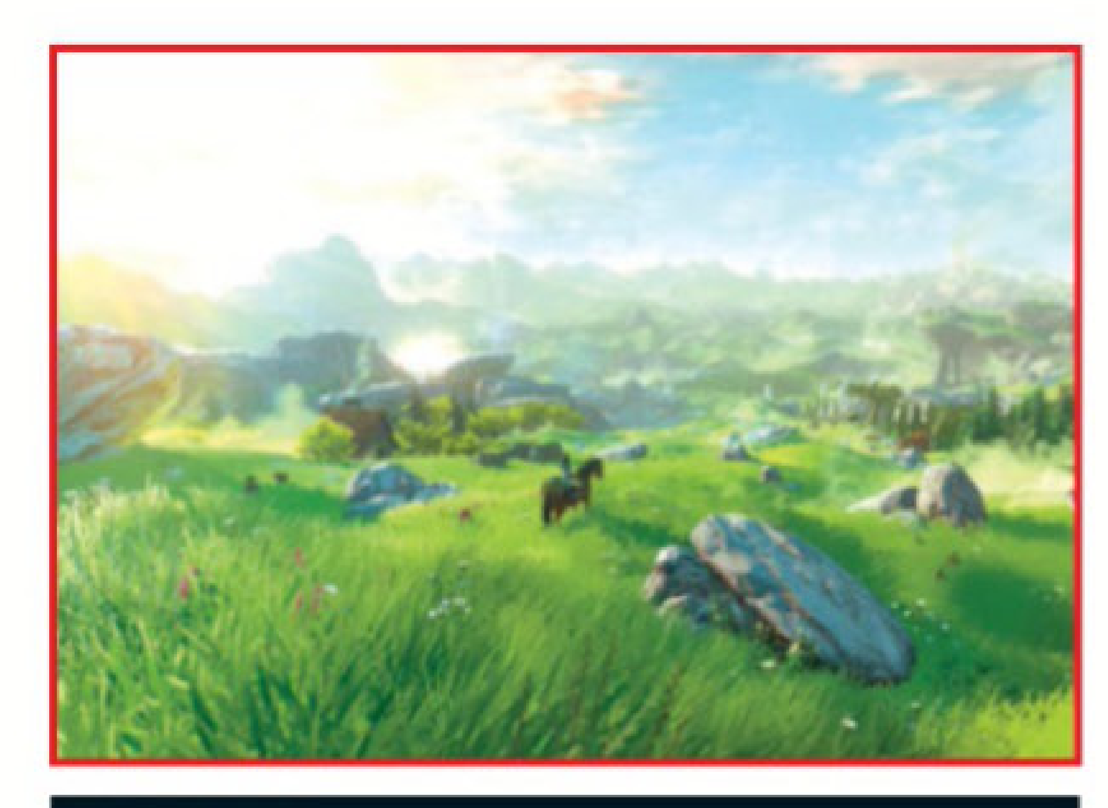
CELTIC LORE

★ Link himself is a Japanese interpretation of traditional Celtic lore – a young, beautiful hero working with nature to defeat a greater evil (think Cu Chulainn). Epona, also, is a Celtic Horse God. It may go some way to explaining how this series has always resonated in the West so well.



JAPANESE HISTORY

★ Aside from a few obvious allusions to Shintoism, the TriForce itself represents the three traditional traits a Japanese Royal Dynasty was supposed to embody. Its continued appearance in other videogames is more likely a nod back to *The Legend Of Zelda* though than to Shintoism.



KYOTO

★ The abundance of nature in Miyamoto's home district is the reason we see so much colour and wilderness in Zelda – a staple that hasn't changed through the series as you continue to explore lush fields and forests in Hyrule and beyond. *Windwaker* was a rare departure from this.

to explore. Miyamoto intentionally made some parts of the game cryptic and difficult, to promote the idea of players communicating about what they found – about how *their* story played out. Consequently, there needed to be a satisfying payoff for going out of your way to discover something, whether it was just an item or a weapon. That payoff came with its own distinctive jingle – the 'secret found' sound byte – which has become synonymous with gaming not just for us gamers, but the mainstream, too.

This innate human quality was paired with something equally as human in Link – a young protagonist that was designed around the ideas of courage, strength and wisdom, something Miyamoto intended to encapsulate young players coming of age. You begin the story innocent and young, yet soon you're armed, motivated, ready to take on the ultimate evil – you, this ordinary person, are going to rescue royalty; the eponymous Zelda.

Yet that wasn't the end of the story – just because you rescued the princess, it didn't mean the game was over. In fact, it was really just beginning. This revelation gave you an idea of how big this game was going to be; there was no 'your princess is in another castle' nonsense here. Miyamoto, again, wanted to do something different.

MIYAMOTO GAVE HIS GAME ITS MOST NOTABLE QUALITY – CREATING A WORLD THAT PROVOKED WANDERLUST

KEY FACTS

- The original version of the game was squeezed onto the Famicom Disk System's 112KB capacity disks
- Nintendo bosses were originally very nervous about *The Legend Of Zelda*'s release, believing players would find the new open world concept 'boring and stressful'
- Princess Zelda's name originally came from Miyamoto's admiration of novelist Zelda Fitzgerald, married to F. Scott Fitzgerald, whose name he thought had 'a magical sound' to it

■■■ Aside from the innovative weaving of story and mechanics – gathering inventory and parts of the Triforce in each level (or dungeon) – the game was also the first instance of battery-based backup saving: when the title shipped to the States, on a cartridge for the NES, its internal battery allowed players to save their game and resume when they next started the system up. It seems basic now but, at the time, this was revolutionary.

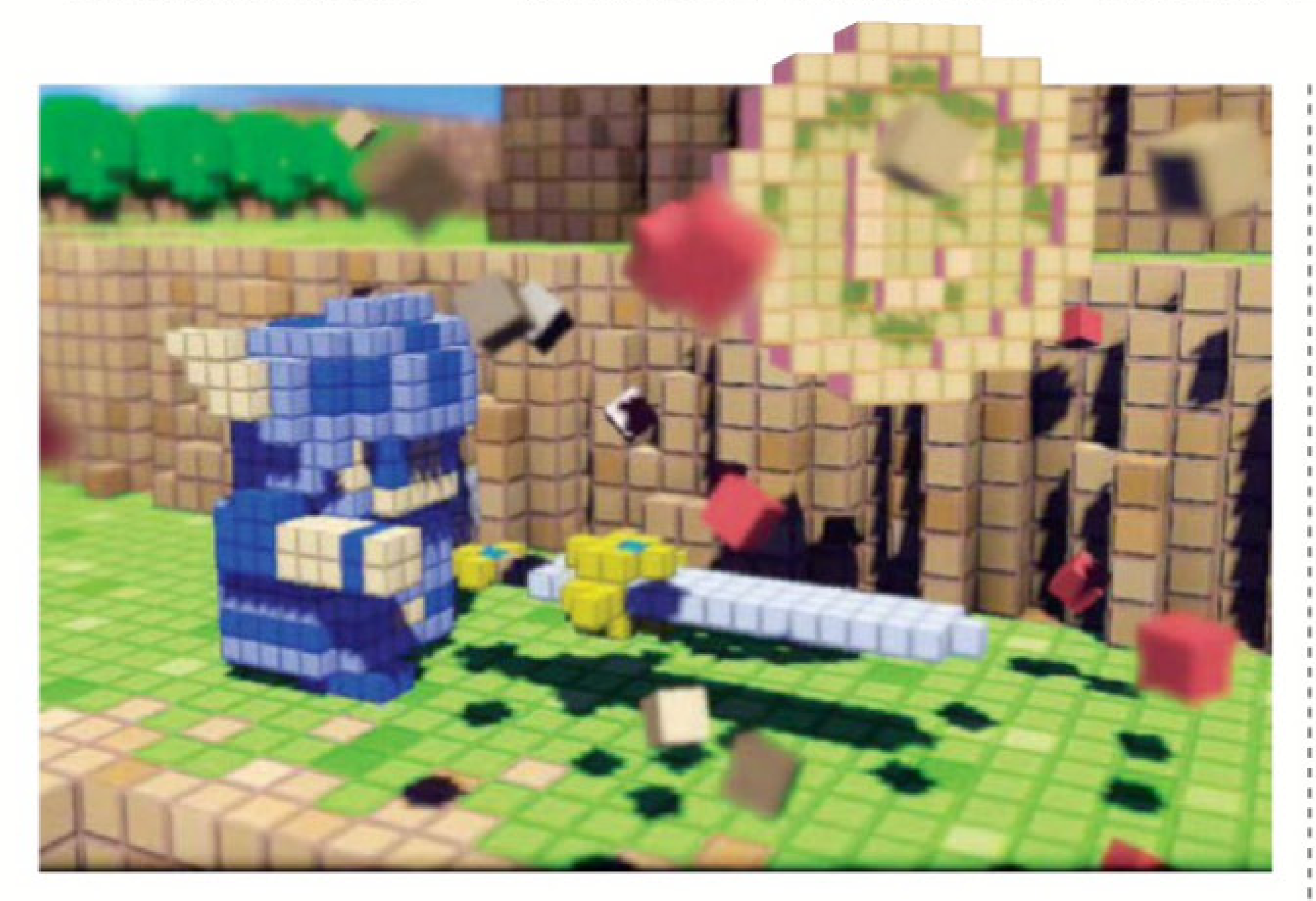
Zelda's impact extends beyond that, though – it begins to shape the very foundations of the genre as we understand them today. Before the game's release, most RPGs were text-based, stat-heavy, riffing unapologetically off tabletop RPGs and high fantasy tropes established in early literature. *Zelda* came along and simplified all that – taking the best parts of fantasy world building and applying it to a simpler two-button setup.

From one man's innocuous daydreaming at his work desk, to a 25-year legacy and countless minds influenced by his concepts, *Zelda* has become as deeply ingrained in our collective cultural subconscious as *Beowulf*, Shakespeare, *Star Wars*, and *The Simpsons*. It's an essential part of worldwide culture, a game that defies that recently drawn-up line between casual and hardcore gamers. It's a beautiful anomaly – a game easily years ahead of its time. *Zelda* – its impact and its legacy – is more than just a game: it's a legend in and of itself.

GAME CHANGERS

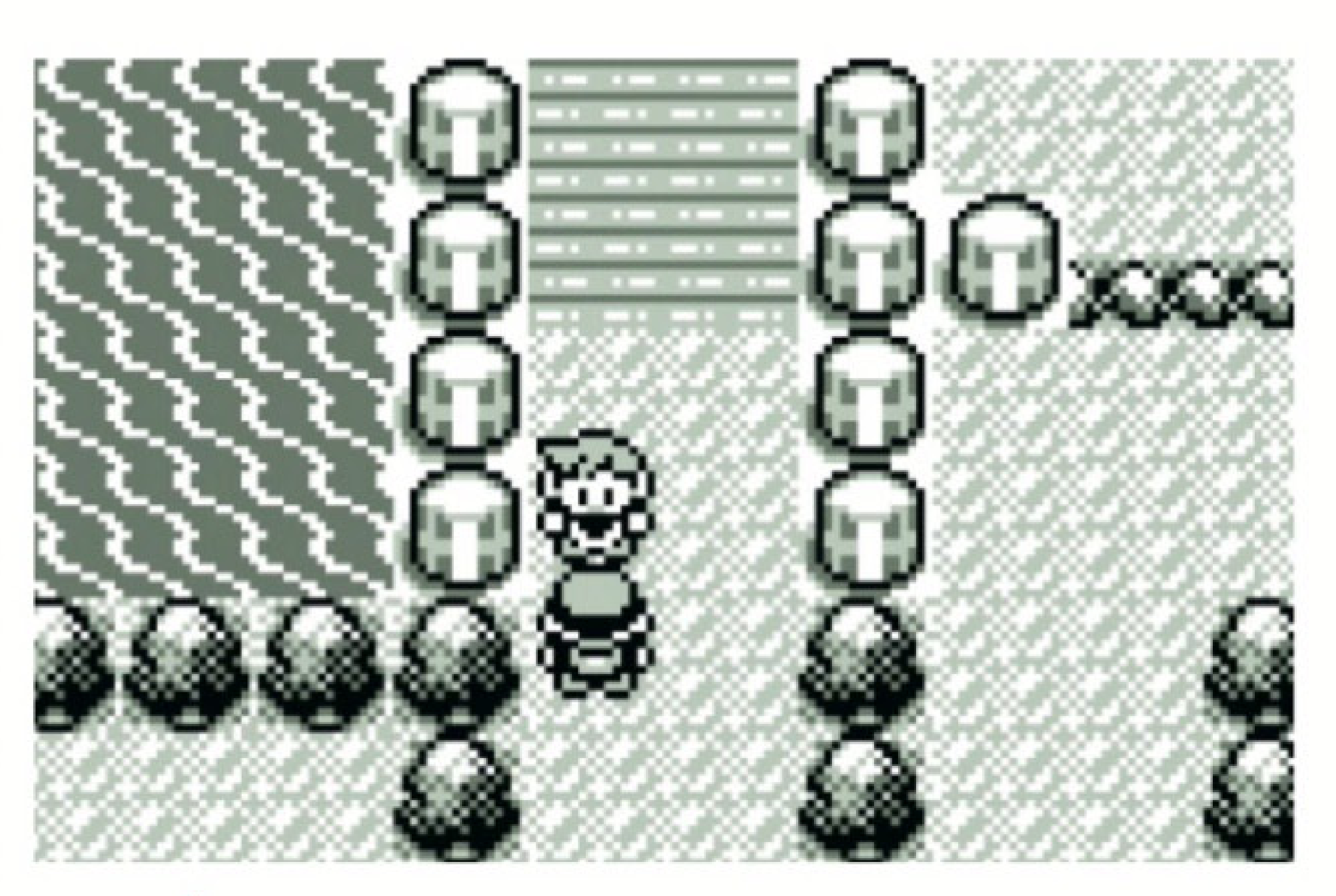
8 GAMES THAT WOULDN'T EXIST WITHOUT TLOZ

OK, SO WE KNOW THAT TITLE COULD APPLY TO A LOT MORE GAMES THAN WE'RE LISTING HERE, BUT THESE GAMES ARE *DIRECTLY* TIED INTO THE ORIGINAL *ZELDA*'S GAMEPLAY AND DESIGNS – THESE GAMES SIMPLY COULD NOT EXIST WITHOUT IT



3D DOT GAME HEROES

■ IF YOU TOOK the bitmap of *Zelda* and beefed it up, making all that 2D top-down presentation 3D, you'd pretty much end up with *3D Dot Game Heroes*. The traditional environmental secrets are in there, too, alongside some tough boss fights, pesky chickens and even a princess in need of rescue.



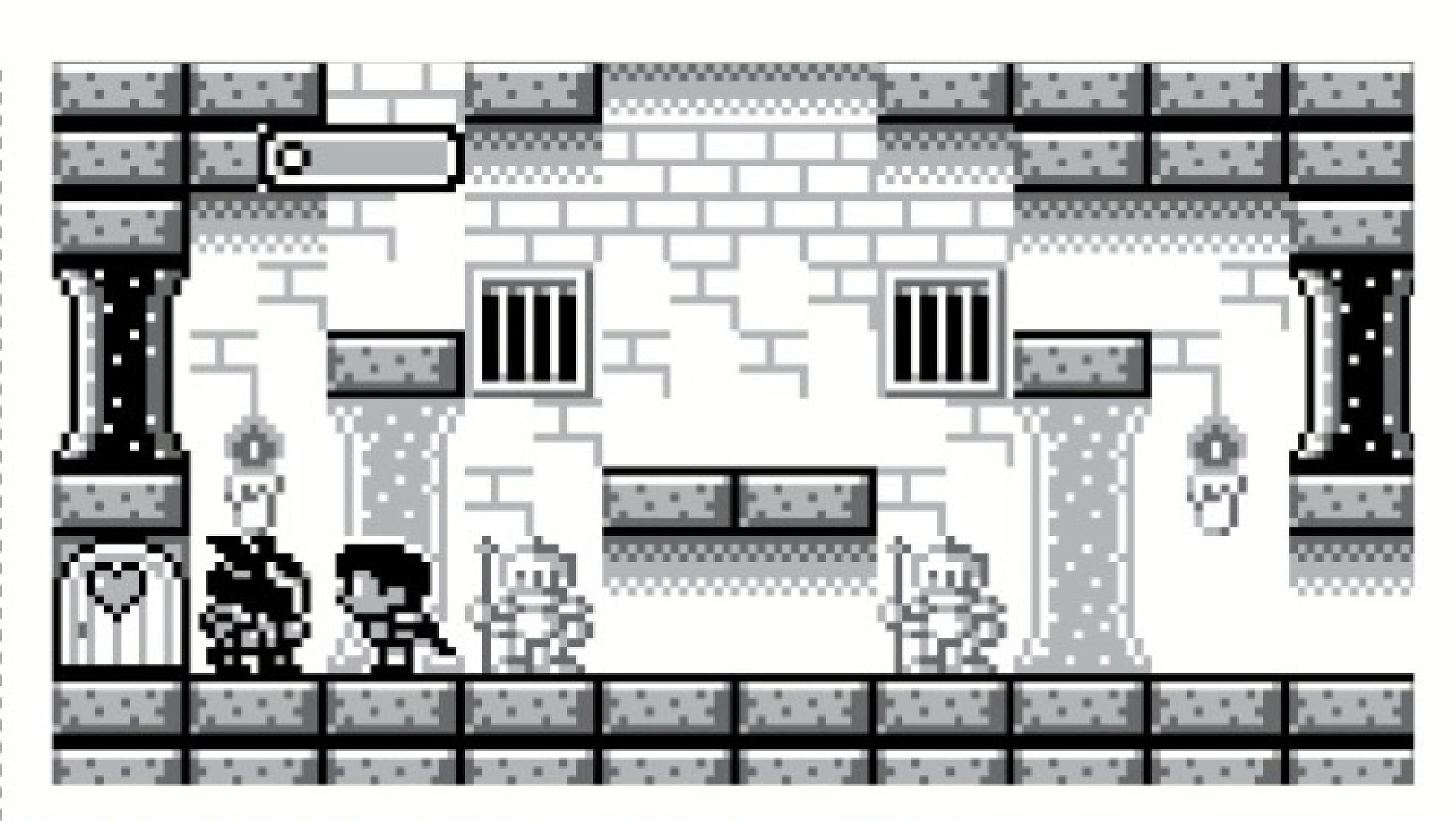
POKÉMON RED/BLUE

■ *POKÉMON* DESIGNER Satoshi Tajiri disliked the urbanisation of his local, once-rural town and designed *Pokémon* to appeal to urban kids that might have enjoyed insect collecting in times gone by. *Zelda* showed there was a market for this innocent countryside setting and convinced Nintendo to gamble on *Pokémon*.



TITAN SOULS

IT HAS 'SOULS' in the name, so you know what you can expect from this… inspired in part by From Software's *Souls* franchise and *Zelda*, *Titan Souls* combines all the manoeuvrability and pixel art of a top-down *Zelda*-like RPG with the brutal masochism of gaming's new pet franchise.



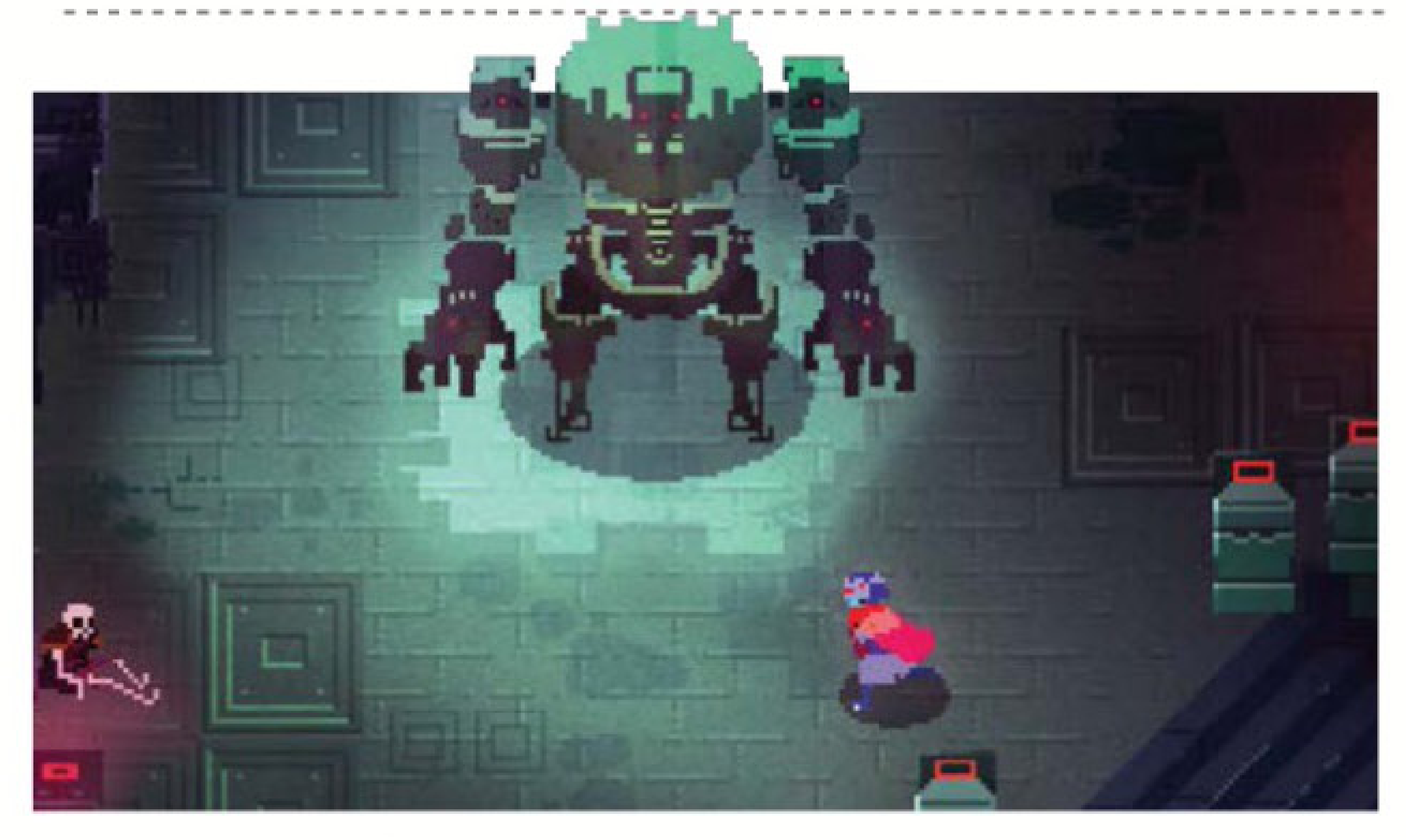
FOR FROG THE BELL TOLLS

THIS BIZARRELY TITLED Japanese RPG was developed by Miyamoto's peers over at Nintendo R&D1 some six years after *The Legend Of Zelda* was released. It was a pared-down version of the game, built on almost exactly the same mechanics but stripped back to work better on the Game Boy.



HACK 'N' SLASH

TO PROMOTE THE game, Double Fine's developers released a series of videos showing how they could hack the source code of *Zelda* – changing one piece of numerical data in the code to impact in-game events (invincibility, walk-through walls and so on). These hacking mechanics became the basis of the eventual game.



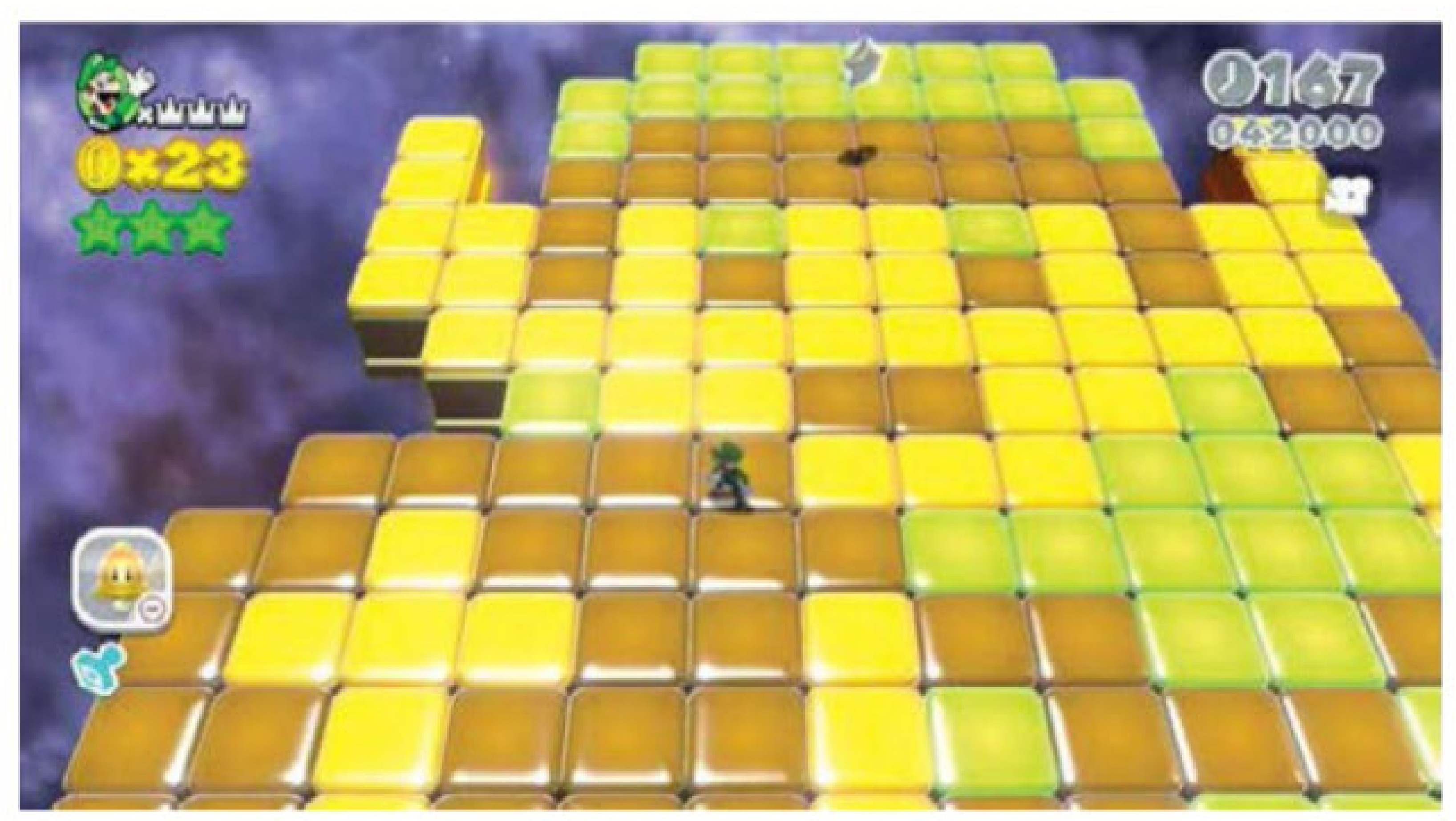
HYPER LIGHT DRIFTER

BY THE CREATOR'S own admission, this game is what would happen if someone got *Diablo* and *The Legend Of Zelda* and put them in a teleporter at the same time. Admittedly, developer Heart Machine quotes *A Link To The Past* as more of an influence, but the vibes *Drifter* gives off certainly owe a lot to the original *Zelda* game.




SOLEIL / CRUSADER OF CENTY

RELEASED IN EU regions as *Soleil*, *Crusader of Centy* was one of Sega's responses to Nintendo's hugely popular *Zelda* franchise. But due to fairly rushed development, *Soleil* was panned, lacking *Zelda*'s depth, interesting story and tricky puzzles. The game was praised for its mechanics, but these were ripped from *Zelda*.



THE ZELDA LEVEL IN SUPER MARIO 3D WORLD

THIS IS ONLY a small section of the game, but a level nestled away as a secret sees the camera pull up and go overhead, and if you're observant, you'll notice an 8-bit Link made out of the coloured blocks that make up the majority of Super Mario 3D World's world.


RETRO



BEST INTRO

ANOTHER WORLD

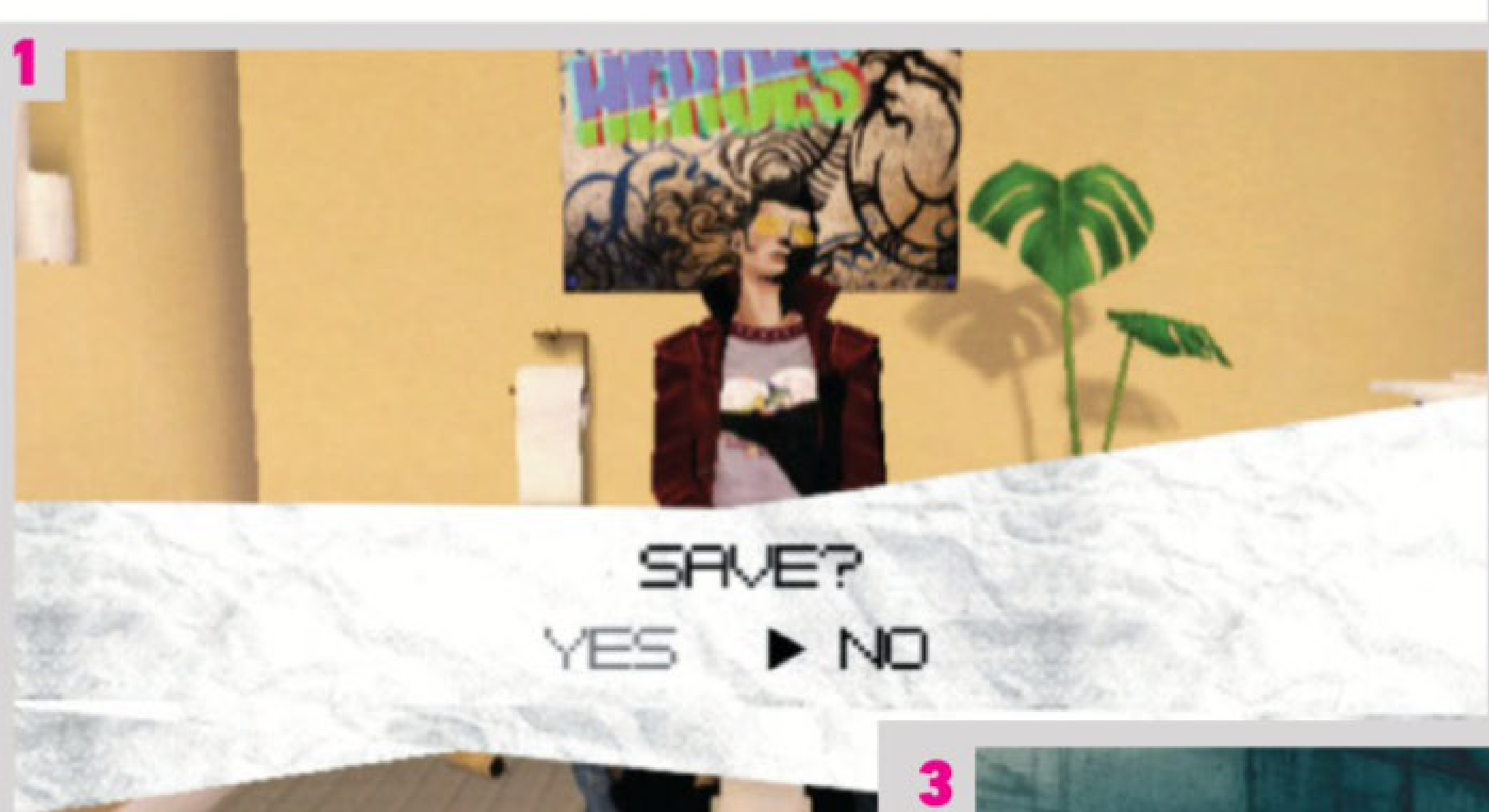
DELPHINE SOFTWARE, [DELPHINE SOFTWARE/ U.S GOLD/VIRGIN INTERACTIVE], MULTI **1991**

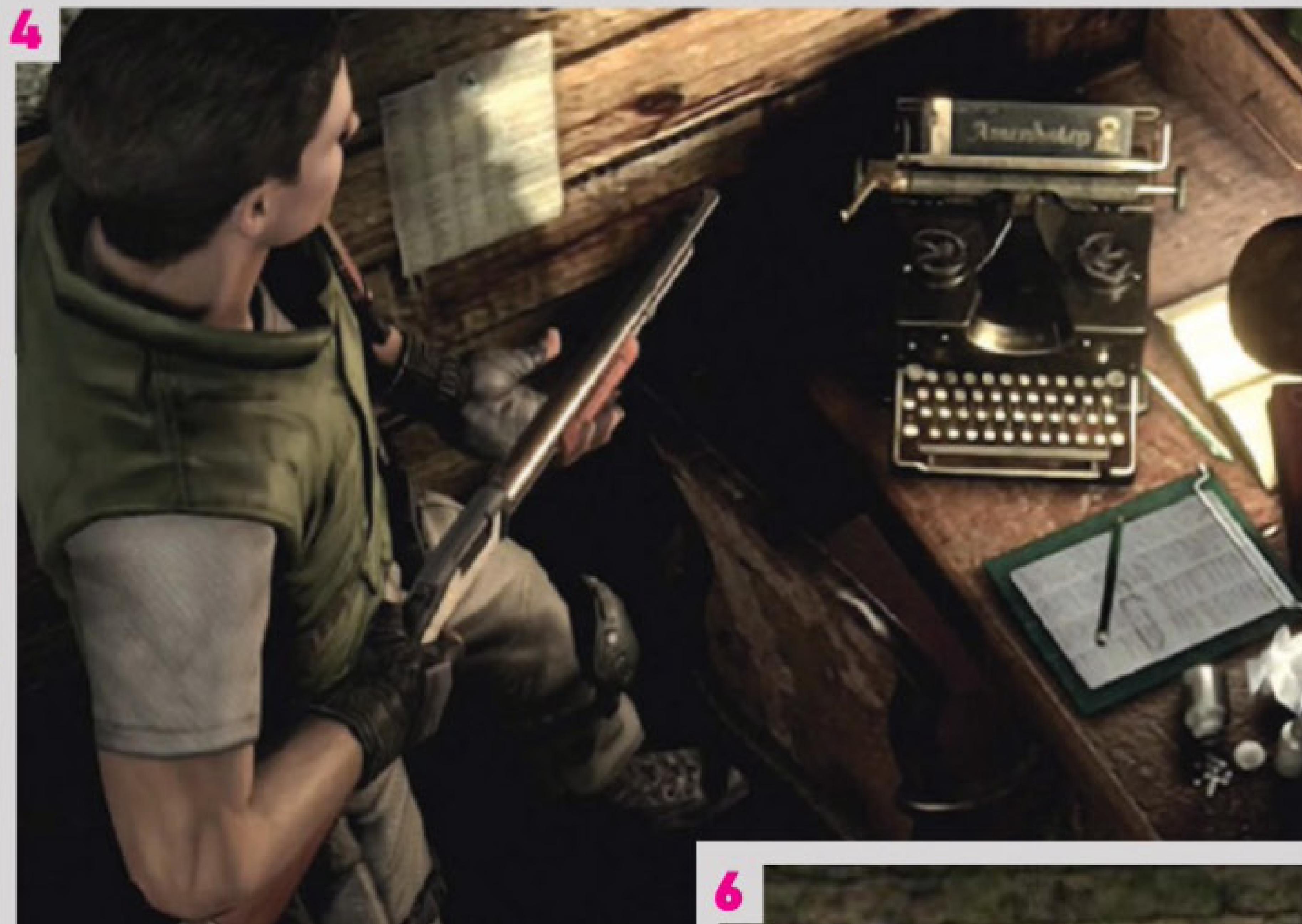
ANOTHER WORLD HAS become widely known for how it combined cinema and gaming – one of the first games back in 1991 to really do so. This symbiotic relationship was achieved through the art of rotoscoping – a handy development tool that allowed developers to hit 20 frames per second on the Amiga (not an easy feat at the time!) Rotoscoping also generated the smooth and iconic art style that *Another World* – and later, *Flashback* – became known for. *Another World*'s designer, Eric Chahi, actually recorded himself performing certain movements and stunts – likely the ones you'll see in the game's action-packed yet oddly calm intro – that he'd later rotoscope 'over': an interesting use of motion-capture before the technique was widely used.

ESSENTIALS

10 SAVES THAT DON'T WORK IN REAL LIFE

■ Until autosaving became the norm in gaming, we all had to find ways to save our games if we didn't want to waste hours at a time for going after some fruitless endeavour. Where a lot of games simply stored this option in a menu somewhere, there were (and still *are*) others that decided to get a little bit more… creative… in how they got you to record your progress…











Using A Toilet
Game: No More Heroes

1 It's no surprise that *No More Heroes*' method of saving your game was you sitting on your toilet, because as it turns out, that's exactly where the idea for the game was initially conceived. Suda-51 once explained that he came up with the idea of a 'game featuring a Johnny Knoxville-style character' while seated firmly on the toilet of his Japanese home. Now, whether that eventual saving mechanic came from this conception, or from Knoxville's penchant for toilet humour is a secret that's remained undisclosed… and would probably stay better off that way. Is that 'Save Game?' message written on toilet paper?

Manually Loading The Phone Card
Game: Alien: Isolation

2 This mechanic actually attracted a fair amount of criticism from players that managed to lock themselves into 'game over loops' thanks to *Alien: Isolation*'s lo-fi, live-action saving system. If you approached the Save Point while the Xenomorph was on your tail, you couldn't simply reboot and it'd be gone, oh no – that would be it – your save hard-wired for you to deal with the invulnerable threat. The level of tension and dread this design choice made, waiting for those lights to click on, one, two, three… it was terrifying, and unique: a ballsy risk by the developer (Creative Assembly) that ultimately paid off.

Petting A Cat
Game: The Evil Within (The Asylum DLC)

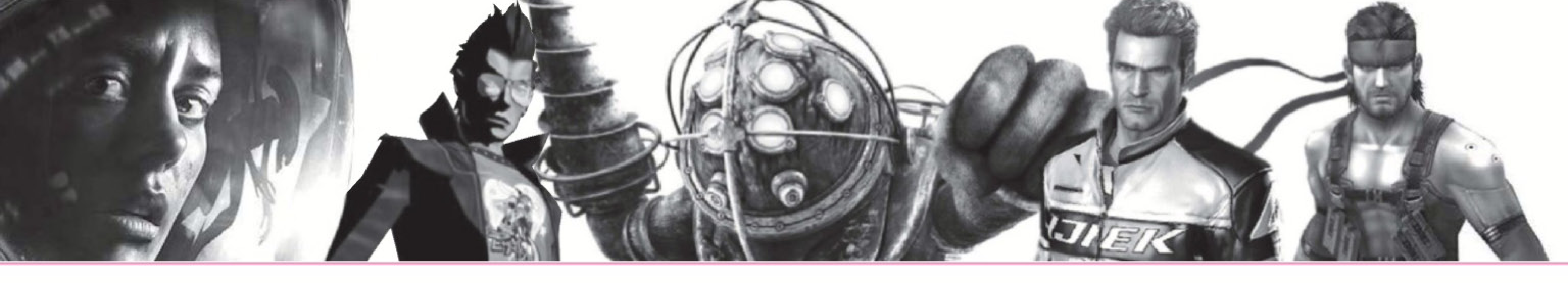
3 The DLC pack for *The Evil Within* – named *The Asylum*, horrifically enough – replaces the tried-and-tested asylum registry of the main game with something a little more… outfield. A black cat with a red collar will come up to you when you sit in a designated spot. The thing is, if that were a dog, we could understand that it would sit there, all loyal and eager to please. But a cat? Imagine running back to that immaculately presented room, bleeding from myriad wounds, cooing to that cat because – guess what – you're about to die, only to find it's high-tailed it outside to catch a singing bird or something.

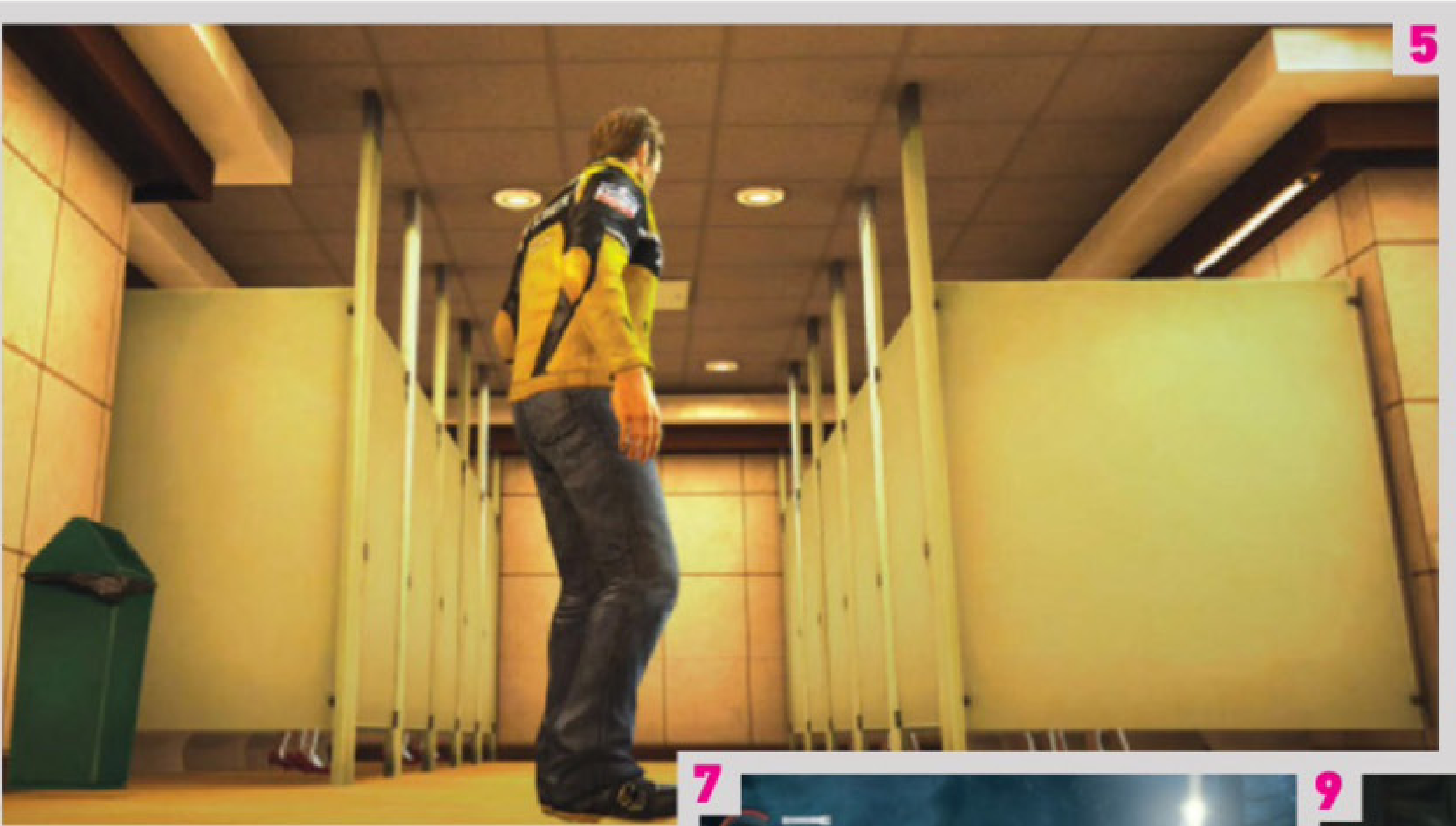
Using A Typewriter
Game: Resident Evil 2

4 *Resident Evil 2*'s very upsetting save system was offset by its save-room ambience; the game made you think about every time you recorded your progress by utilising an item system – you could only save your game if you had enough typewriter ribbon on you. This made tactical saving impossible – you'd rather go gung-ho and risk getting as far as possible than waste precious ribbon. This *ordeal* of a save mechanic was offset by some lovely acoustic melodies that offered some of the only moments of calm in an otherwise tense game. We still hear those haunting melodies to this day…

Using A Toilet (Again)
Game: Dead Rising

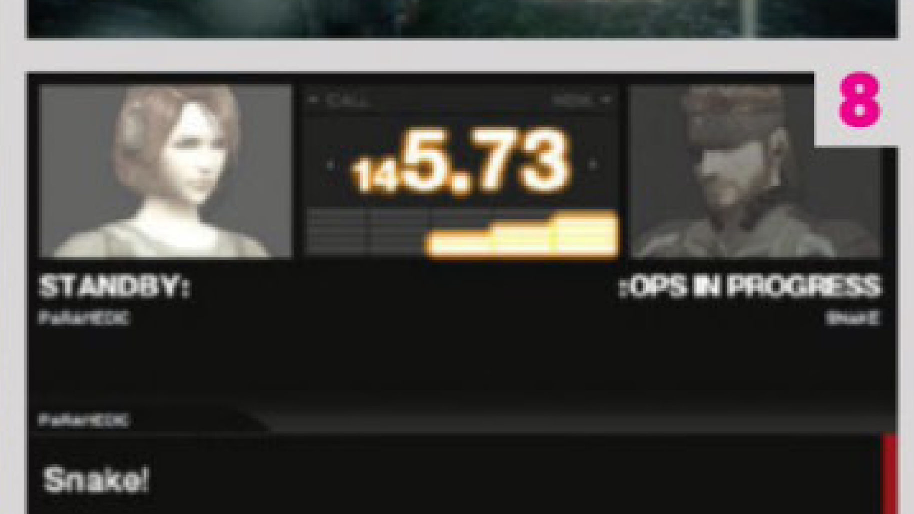
5 At least with N*o More Heroes* your saving was a little more structured – thanks to the open-world 'I need to save a lot' mentality of *Dead Rising*, using the toilet in that game poses some interesting questions: how do the heroes of the series have enough bodily waste to save *whenever they like*? Do they always intentionally save when they go to the bathroom, or is it something that they can choose to do as and when they like? Since the protagonists have been all male (so far), does it only work for urinals, too? Or if the staunch zombie killers fancied heading to a cubicle, would that suffice?













Sitting on a Couch
Game: Ico

6 You're wandering around a dungeon – after a key to a magical chest way up in a castle somewhere (or something) – and you've gotten a bit tired. After all, jumping over all those boulders has made your legs ache. You could really do with a sit down. Well, luckily for you, in that room just beyond that rock formation, there's a sofa. A pretty immaculate and well-presented sofa, at that. After a brief rest (where your companion rests her head in your lap), you're ready to go, refreshed and healthy. But there's one question that haunts you – who buys these sofas, and why are they absolutely *everywhere*?

Find a Street Light
Game: Alan Wake

7 Everyone's favourite Stephen King simulator, *Alan Wake*, uses the game's theme of light and dark to good effect throughout, a trope that extends to its save feature, requiring you to pass under a street lamp to save your progress. In terms of game design, this meant that developer Remedy Entertainment had the license to break nearly all the lights in the game, a mechanical reason for making the town of Bright Falls even more murky and terrifying. Take it from us; it turns out hanging around under streetlights like a weirdo is a great way to alleviate writer's block. Heh.

Call The Paramedic
Game: Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater

8 The codecs in the *Metal Gear* series have gained a level of infamy for their indulgence of Hideo Kojima's interests, but never is this more prevalent than in *Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater* with the game's paramedic. The codec has two options to call on the medic – healing or saving. If you call her to save, she begins by recording your progress, but follows up the task by talking about films (but only if you stay on the line). In a moment of (un) surprising self-indulgence, one of the paramedic's conversations even turns to videogames, and how unlikely a concept they are. Oh, Kojima.

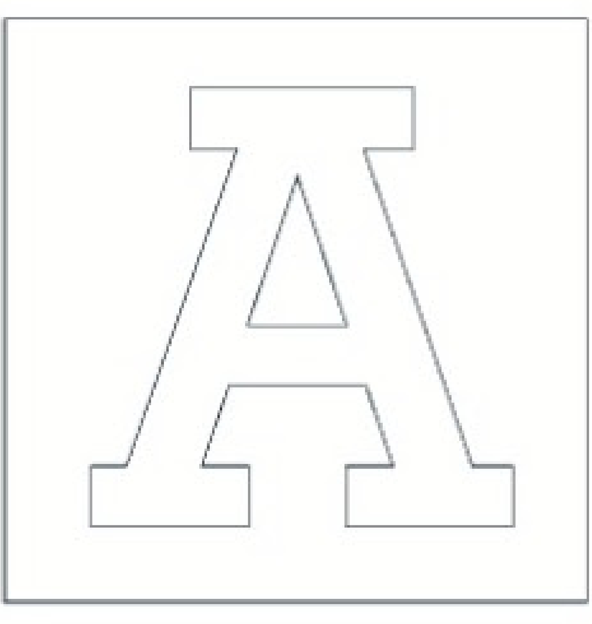
Rebuild Your Entire Body
Game: BioShock

9 One good way of getting around death is to simply imprint your genetic code into a machine, and then have said machine totally rebuild you should the worst fate befall you. In theory, this isn't a bad idea at all, but when you begin to think about the idea, it falls apart – take, for example, the old philosophical idea regarding the ship of Theseus: a ship begins to get rebuilt, plank by plank, from the stern to the bow. After what amount of time does it cease to be the ship it once was, becoming something entirely new? Do you stop being you after one visit to the Vita-Chamber, or does it take more…

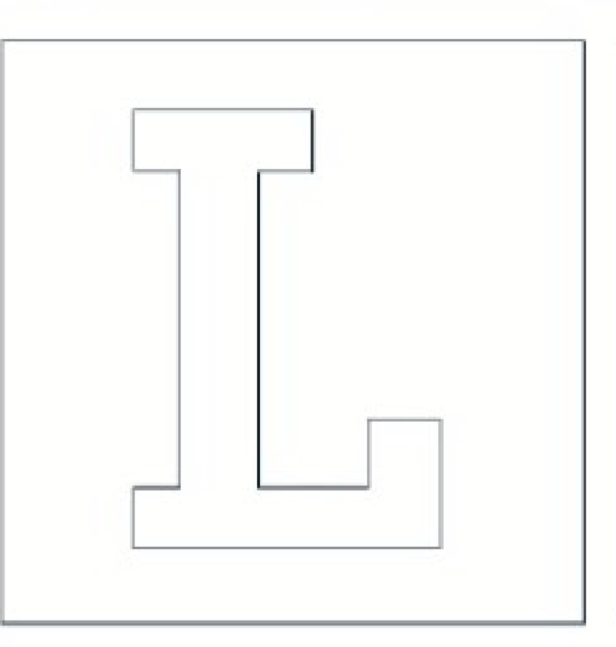
Give Your Dad A Call
Game: Earthbound

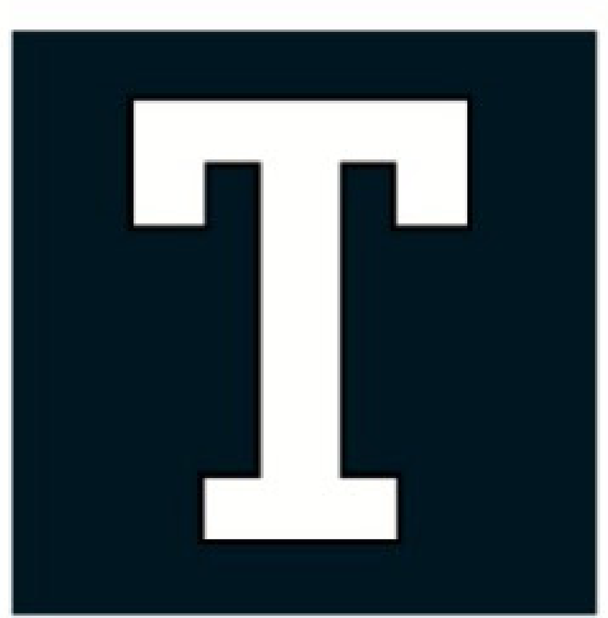
10 Your dad is actually a really sweet and caring guy in Earthbound – he knows you're on a mission for justice (or something) and will even transfer you money or give you helpful tips to guide you on your way. Unfortunately, for all his goodwill and generosity, he doesn't realise that you carry a phone around on your person, and that he could actually call you at any time. He'd rather you go out of your way to find a payphone, somewhere in town, and get in touch with him. Maybe all his gifts and such are just misplaced narcissistic traits, and ultimately they are all bribes in order to get you to phone him.











SENTRY EYE TRACKER

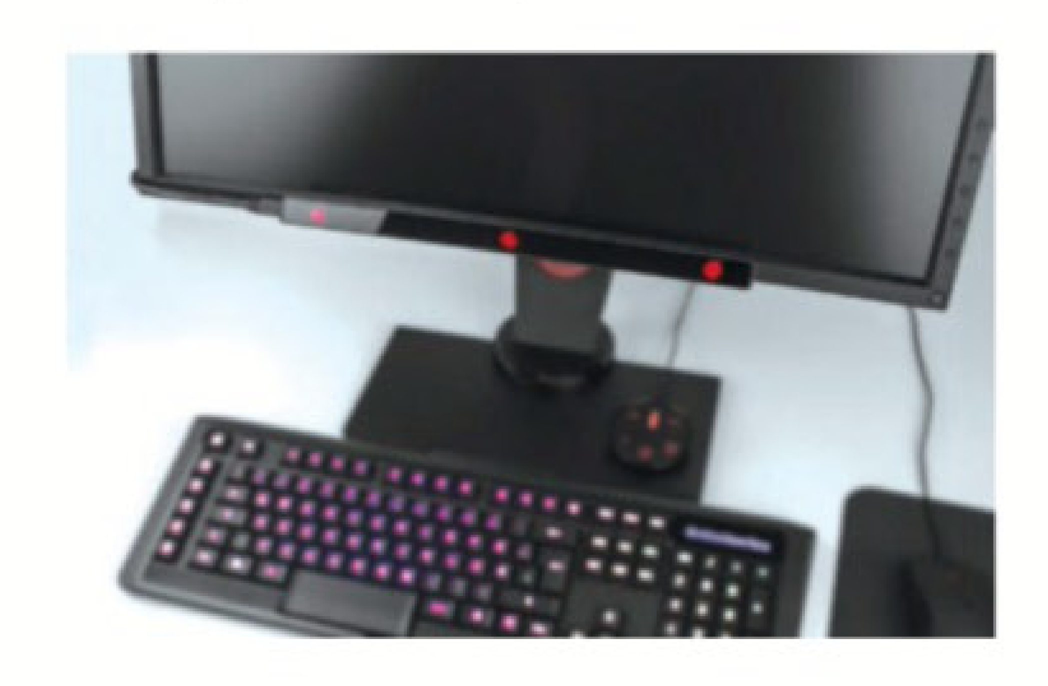


MANUFACTURER: **STEELSERIES**
PRICE: **£144.99**

FOR PRO GAMERS, it's all about improving their game. Whether it's a new controller or keyboard to give them the edge when it comes to online gaming, or just rewatching recordings of their play to try and up their game, becoming the best of the best is a constant battle. But even for the average gamer, it can be a great idea to take a look at your game and analyse what you're doing wrong. With SteelSeries' Sentry eye-tracker, you can get feedback of where on the screen you're looking, so you can see the areas that you're simply not paying enough attention to, and the places you spend too long looking at.

It sadly only works with three games so far – *Assassin's Creed Rogue*, *Starcraft II* and *DOTA 2* – but it's promised that more games will be supported soon. Still, if you own any of those titles then this is the perfect addition to your setup; especially if you're a fan of streaming. Thanks to some clever software tomfoolery, you'll be able to get a live view of your current view overlaid onto your stream.

It's a clever little system that seems like a really good idea – especially if you want to really up your game. The biggest downfall, aside from the limited number of supported games, is the high price tag, but we have to say we're really pleased that such advanced tech is available to consumers. The Eye Tracker is certainly a must for any tech enthusiast.





PS4 CONTROLLER SKIN

These skins add a little colour to your controller, and might just stop the controller slipping from your hand when you are on the edge of lobbing it at your TV in sheer frustration at hackers in *COD*. This is a comfy little addition to your DualShock.

www.amazon.co.uk



GAMING CARTRIDGE FLASKS

The perfect way to hide your alcohol if you're a time traveller going back to the late Eighties. If you don't have a Delorean, though, these still make for an awesome way to transport your booze. And we have to applaud the awful pun titles.

www.thinkgeek.com



CLASSIC ARCADE WRISTWATCH

Who needs an Apple Watch? Not us, because we've got a Classic Arcade Wristwatch, which lights up and makes a noise when you press the Fire button beside the joystick. This is what dreams are made of if you ask us.

www.thinkgeek.com

GAMING CLOTHING



ZELDA ANKLE SOCKS

Want to wield the power of the triforce while also keeping your toes toasty and warm, these are the socks for you. The size options are limited, so you'll just have to hope you're worthy.
www.thinkgeek.com



WOW BLOODFANG ROGUE ROBE

Have you ever gotten out of the shower, slipped on your robe and thought "I just wish I had the ability to inflict 249 to 277 damage"? Well now you can, with this awesome Rogue robe.
www.thinkgeek.com



EPIC HYLIAN SHIELD

Put one of the most iconic shields in the gaming world on your chest with this awesome tee – which is only improved by some awesome effects and an affordable price tag.
www.teefury.com



JIM RAYNOR FIGURE

SOLD BY: **THINKGEEK** PRICE: **£549.99**

ONE REASON FOR *Starcraft* *II*'s incredible popularity (aside from the perfectly-balanced combat) is the way in which the game manages to give individual characters a voice on a battlefield filled with hundreds of units. This figure features *Jim Raynor*, the Terran legend, in his articulated armour, and includes his signature revolver, along with a series of extra weapons to display, a blast shield to place over his visor, and a removable helmet for a full view of the beautiful man himself.
www.thinkgeek.com

ARKHAM ASYLUM BATMAN FIGURE

SOLD BY: **FORBIDDEN PLANET** PRICE: **£499.99**

WITH ROCKSTEADY'S FINAL *Batman* title finally landing on the next gen consoles in June, what better time to go back and remember the good old days with this B*atman Arkham Asylum* Premium Format Figure. Decked out in his original suit from the first game in the series, *Batman* looks as terrifying as you would expect. An interchangeable hand lets you add a Baterang to the figure, while his free flowing cape can be positioned however you like. Add the Joker figure alongside this and you have a classic face-off.
www.forbiddenplanet.com





LARA CROFT TEMPLE OF OSIRIS FIGURE

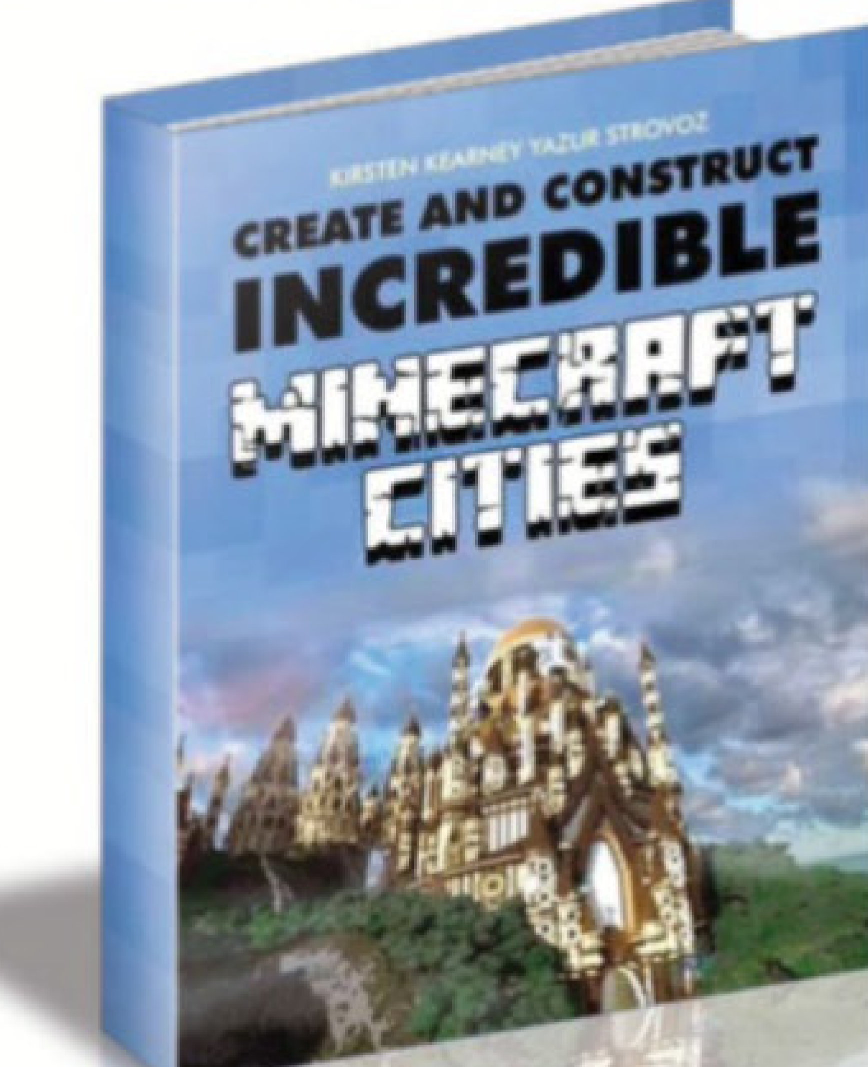
SOLD BY: **FORBIDDEN PLANET**
PRICE: **£279.99**

THE LATEST *TOMB* *Raider* reboot may have sent Lara in a slightly different direction in terms of design and plot, but the other games in the series still have the classic Lara that we know so well. This figure, based on Lara's design in *Temple Of Osiris*, places her back in a blue tank top, puts a pistol in each hand, and sees her leaping sideways as she fires at what is probably an ancient Egyptian god. And if that's wrong, we don't think we want to be right.
www.forbiddenplanet.com



CREATE AND CONSTRUCT: INCREDIBLE MINECRAFT CITIES

PUBLISHER: **MITCHELL BEAZLEY**



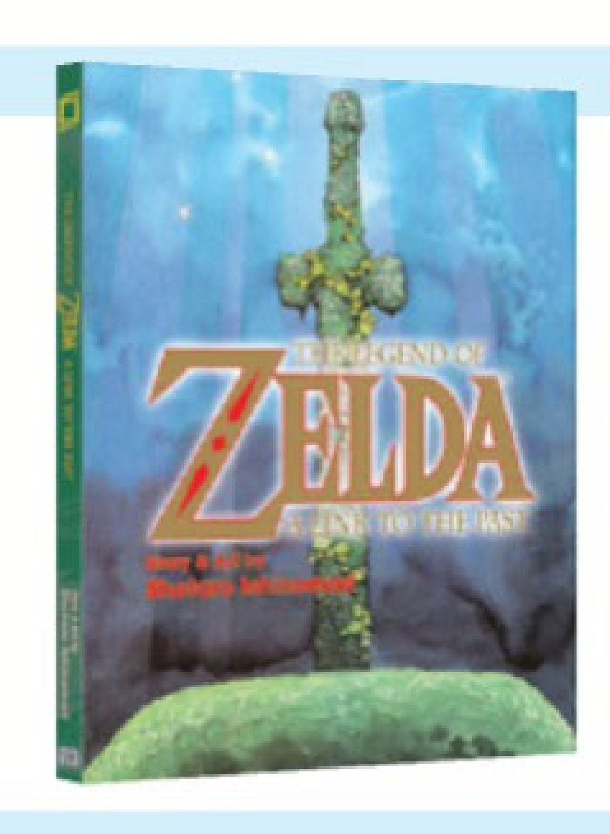
THERE'S NO DENYING that *Minecraft* is something of a videogame phenomenon; it might not be perfect, but it has captured the imaginations of millions of gamers worldwide. This book aims to shed some light on some of the most impressive creations on offer in the world of *Minecraft*, and give the reader tips on how they can improve their own building skills to create something mesmerising.

While the title starts with basic building skills that will be boring for all but *Minecraft* beginners, the majority of the book showcases the work of master *Minecraft* builders, giving an overview of their frankly ridiculous worlds based on real life, popular culture, or just architectural plans drawn up inside their own minds. Each map is complemented by small tutorials that help you re-create different areas from their world, as well as tips from the builders themselves to help give you some pointers on moulding a level you can be proud of.

What the book does best is inspire. While the depth and detail shown off in each showcase can be massively daunting, the title does a good job of breaking down each world into small pieces and teaching you how to re-create them on your own. It also explains how visual mods and skin packs can adjust the look and feel of each map, giving you the confidence to go and try them out. If there's one failing, it's perhaps that it sacrifices detail for quantity – we would've happily seen fewer maps and had some more advanced tutorials for the more complex areas. Still, this is still great for any *Minecraft* fan.

www.octopusbooks.co.uk





LINK TO THE PAST COMIC

A Link To The Past is probably our favourite *Legend Of Zelda* title of all time (although the discussion still rages in the office) and now we can enjoy it once more thanks to manga legend Shotaro Ishinomori. There's also an exclusive poster, but be quick – it's a limited edition so it may not last very long.

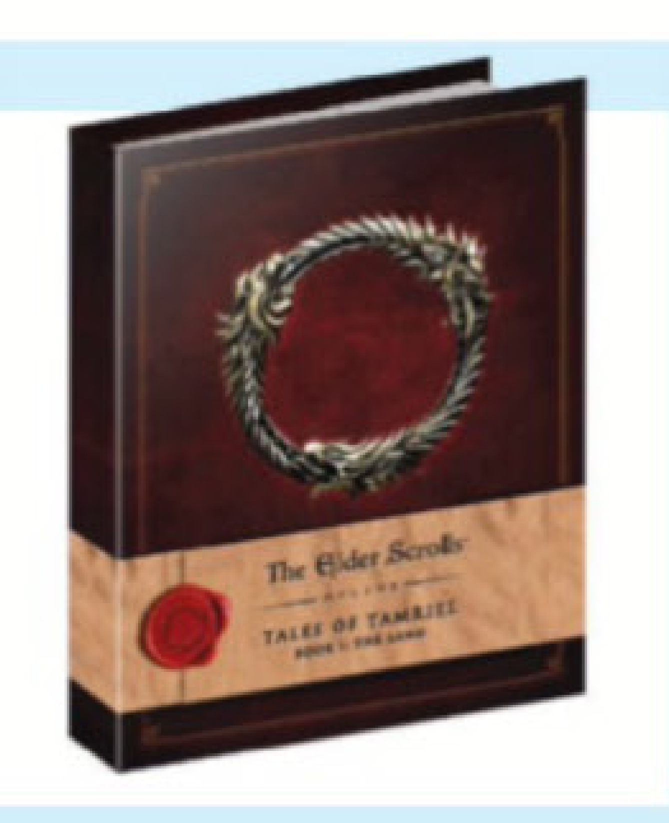
www.thinkgeek.com



THE ART OF ASSASSIN'S CREED UNITY

While *Unity* had its failings, Paris itself really was beautiful. This book showcases concept art, sketches and commentary of the creative process, plus two beautiful signed prints called *Last Riot* and *Notre Dame*. The limited edition also includes a foil slip-case.

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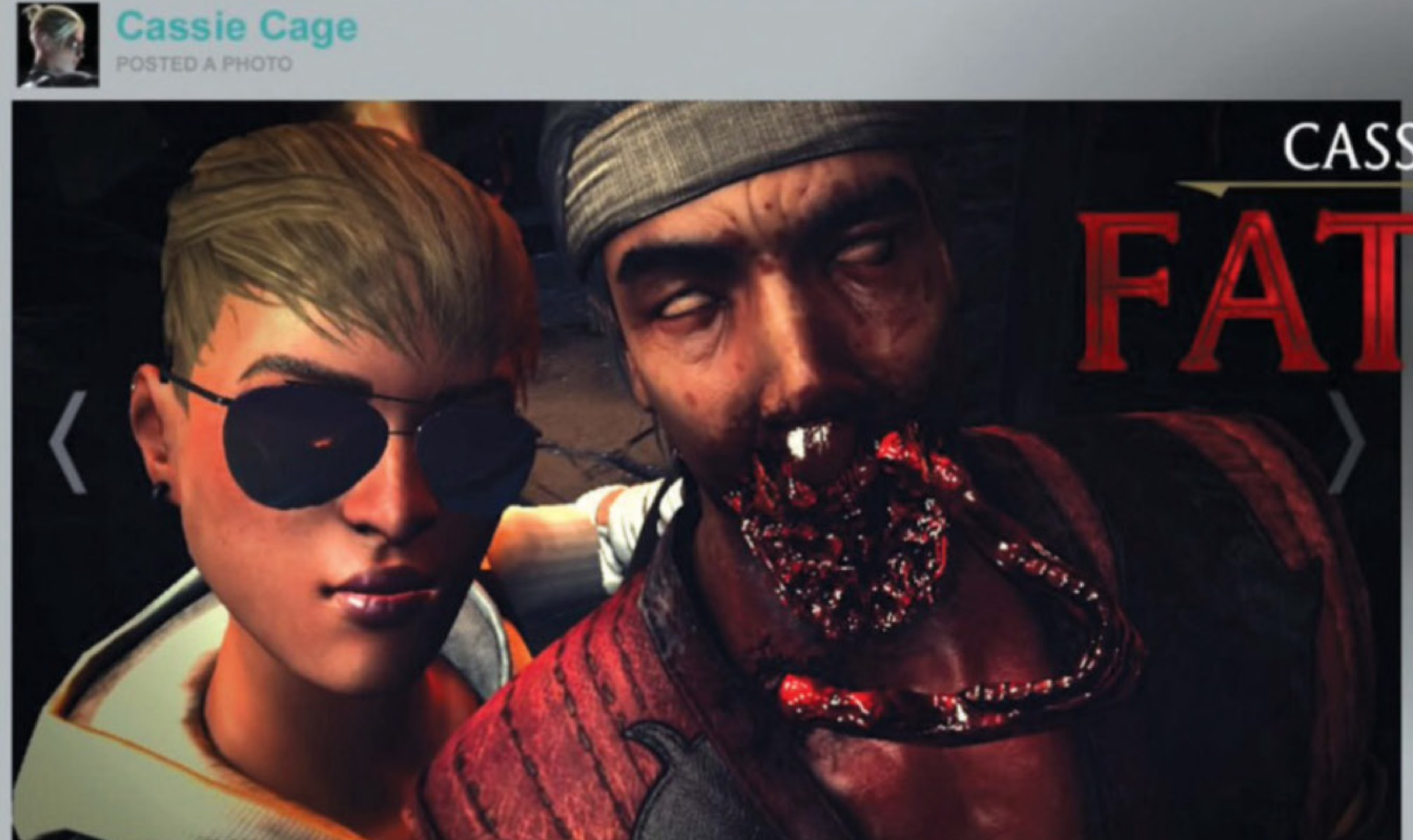
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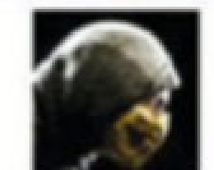
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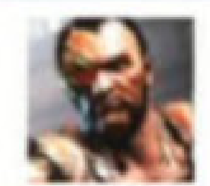


RECOMMEND TAG SHARE



Jeff2N1T	1 min ago	Fatality of the Year!
C-Spicer	1 min ago	I don't know, there's really no definitive committee to award such a thing.
GonzoHanzo	1 min ago	I wanna see this in games™ 163!!
KanO's	1 min ago	Awh but that's not on sale until 16th July :(





COMMENT

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INVASION: Giant portal spotted

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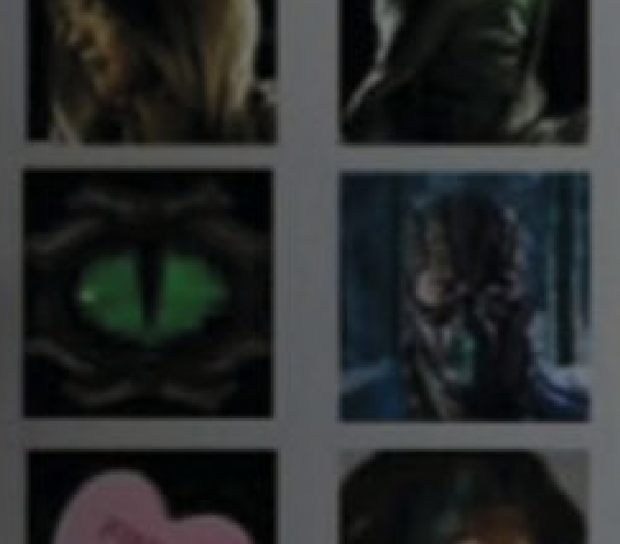
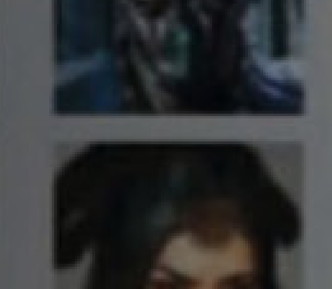
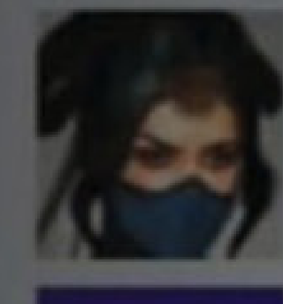


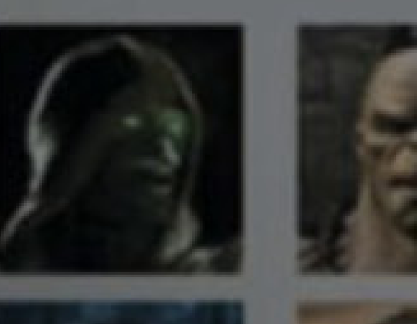
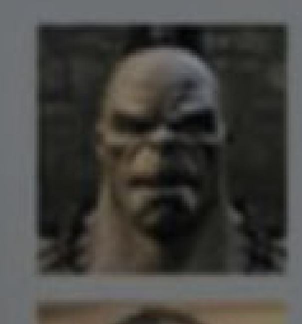
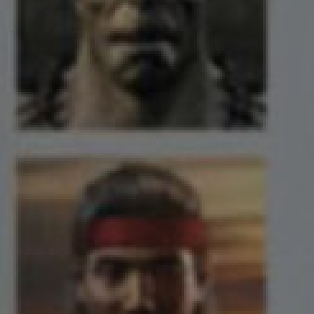
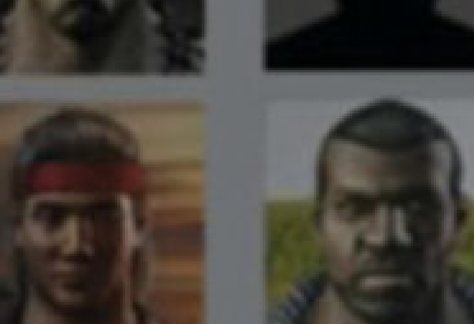
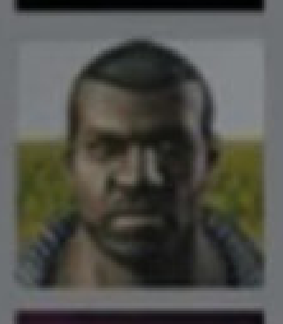
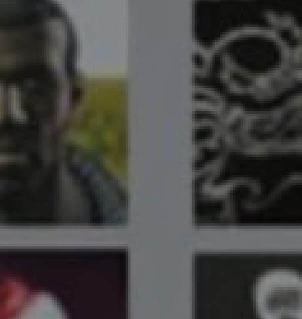
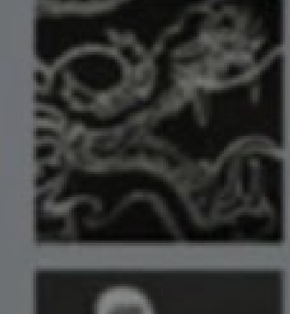
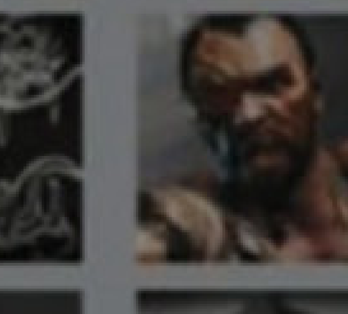
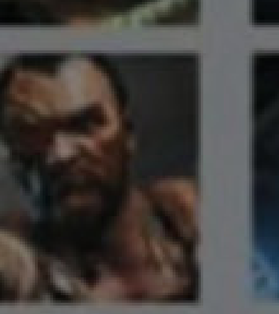
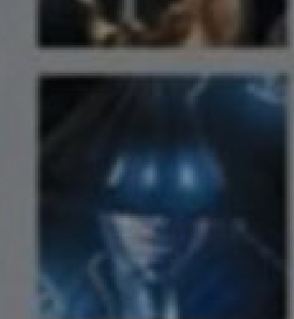
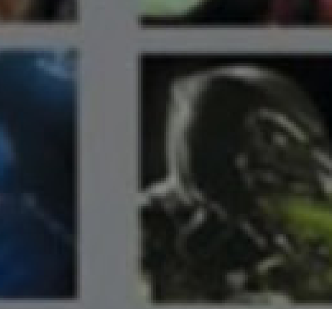
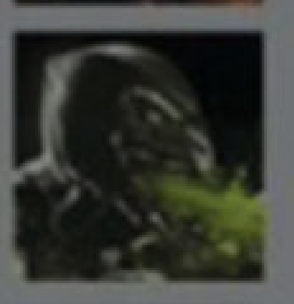
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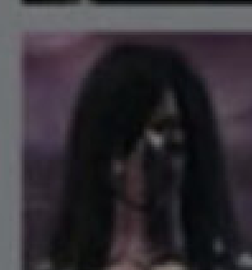
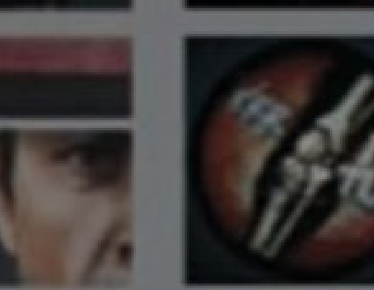
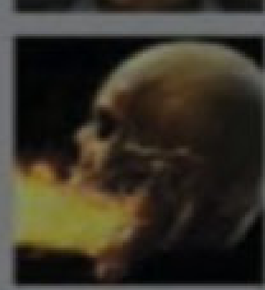


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